



THE CASE FILES
OF
JEWELER
RICHARD

WRITTEN BY
NANAKO
TSUJIMURA

4
NOVEL

ILLUSTRATED BY
UTAKO
YUKIHIRO



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Seven Seas Entertainment

HOSEKISHO RICHARD-SHI NO NAZOKANTEI

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Illustration by Utako Yukihiro

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CAST

Seigi Nakata

A dedicated college student hoping to go into civil service after graduation, he has started working part-time for Richard. Just as his name—Seigi, meaning “justice”—implies, he’s an earnest young man always looking to help others, even if he may be a bit lacking in tact at times.



Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian

An Englishman from Sri Lanka who speaks Japanese more fluently than your average Japanese national and is an accomplished jeweler. While his precise age remains a mystery, his incredible beauty would strike anyone, regardless of gender, utterly speechless.



Case 1:

???

“I’LL LEAVE YOU WITH THIS: You are far too trusting. And although you will get hurt from time to time, that is the nature of life. I would encourage you to listen to your head over your heart. That is all.”

Richard’s words had been circulating through my entire body ever since, almost like they’d mingled with the blood in my veins.

Tokyo was moving from fall into winter. Dry wind beat against my cheeks whenever I went out, and more people were wearing scarves. The number of students with reference books and exam prep texts in the common areas at school was gradually increasing, and the self-study spots in the main library were always full.

On the door of Jewelry Étranger, just off Ginza’s Nanachome, was a printed sign that read, “Due to various circumstances, we will be closed for the time being.” The ragged corners of the paper spoiled the elegant beauty of the shop.

It had been a month since he suddenly left, and Richard still hadn’t returned. Nor had he given any indication that he *would* be returning. The shop remained closed. The people in the office on the first floor hadn’t heard anything, but when I asked the manager to call the real estate agent who managed the building, I was told that rent had been paid through March of next year. He’d used the incredibly vague phrase “for the time being,” which gave me hope that he’d simply left in a panic to deal with an illness in the family or something similar, and would contact me once things had calmed down.

But if that was true, it was hard to imagine why he’d say he was “leaving” me with one last piece of advice. An extra month of my part-time pay had been deposited into my bank account, too.

I just hadn’t been able to find my rhythm again ever since. My life hadn’t actually changed much—I’d go to class and then come home to my apartment. I’d take the train to campus, go out to lunch with someone, go back to campus

for another class, and go home. It was just that every moment in between was filled with thoughts of Richard. Every time I heard the sound of a wheeled suitcase rolling down the sidewalk, I'd whip around so fast it startled everyone near me. Whenever I saw someone with blond hair in the crowd at Takadanobaba, I'd move to try to get a look at their face, only to be disappointed when I discovered it wasn't him. Every green car I saw started looking like his Jaguar. Whenever I overheard girls chatting about a guy they thought was attractive, it took all my willpower not to ask them if they were talking about an Englishman with an extremely long name.

I'd been telling myself that these feelings would settle down in no time for a month now. I figured it was about time I gave up on that notion.

Nights were the worst because I'd have awful dreams whenever I tried to sleep—for some reason, Richard would be in my apartment, standing next to my bed. I just wanted it to stop already. Seeing someone in your dreams like that was such a bad omen. He'd always have this sparkling, jewel-like smile on his face. He'd look like he was trying to tell me something, but it was as if I were watching a video on mute. And for some reason, my body wouldn't move, even when I tried to get up. When I told him I couldn't hear him, Richard would close his eyes and bring his face closer to mine, only to pull away and give me this vaguely cruel smile when I started. And then I'd wake up all alone in my room, drenched in sweat.

I had a feeling the nightmare was related to a certain someone comparing me to "a man getting cold feet and pulling back just before going in for a kiss," because he thought I was a coward.

He didn't text or call me either. In my confusion about what had happened while I was standing in front of the door to *Étranger* that day, I ended up calling one of Richard's regular customers, Mr. Homura. Apparently, all Richard had told his regulars was that he'd be out of the country for a while. That was all the information I had. I had no idea why he left or when he'd be back—or even *if* he'd be back.

He had vanished from my life just as suddenly as he had entered it. It was almost like Richard had never existed.

And I had begun to live like my entire body had been taken over by his shadow. It was a nightmare, whether I was awake or asleep. *What is wrong with me? I just want it to stop. I can't take it anymore. I can't function.*

But I knew it wasn't his fault. It was my own fault.

I was too trusting, and that only got me hurt.

He even told me I should listen to my head more.

I found myself in Ginza every Saturday, in front of the door to an empty Étranger. I always brought tape with me to fix the sign if it had started peeling. And then I'd leave. If it got any more messed up, I'd probably need to use the computer lab at school to make a new one to replace it.

I turned on to Hanatsubaki-doori from Chuo-doori. When I looked over at the parking lot near the bath house, I saw a little black cat rolling around on the concrete. It looked familiar.

"You're...Sakura, aren't you? I haven't seen you in a while. I hope you're doing well."

No one was around, so I crouched down to beckon the cat over. I just wanted a little physical contact to cheer myself up. The friendly cat approached, but that was when I saw it—the car parked behind her. It had brand new tires. And the paint color was...

...green.

It was a foreign car.

With a silver hood ornament—a jaguar.

The license plate matched, too. It was definitely the same car.

I heard the cat hiss at me when I got up and started running. *Sorry, I didn't mean to spook you! You're just so cute—I hope you can forgive me. I got spooked, too, okay? He's back. He's back! Richard is back in Ginza.*

I ran up to the second story of the building Étranger was in and discovered that the notice was gone from the door. I wasn't dreaming. He really was back. I was too impatient to ring the doorbell, so I knocked on the door with one hand, the other placed on the doorknob. After about thirty seconds, it unlocked. I

pushed the door open as fast as I could without potentially knocking over the person on the other side.

“Richard! Wait...you’re not Richard.”

“Welcome!”

He was short, and his voice was deep. That was my initial impression of him.

A dark-skinned man stood in the familiar interior of *Étranger*. He must’ve been about 160 centimeters tall, in his fifties, with a velvety tenor voice and salt-and-pepper hair. Beneath his nose sat a short, neatly parted mustache. The combination of his dapper suit and leather shoes almost made him look like a gentleman who’d time-traveled to the present from a hundred years ago. Visually, at least, he reminded me of the Indian-Italian man I’d met at the auction.

The houseplant in the back of the shop had withered—I guess that was to be expected. It hadn’t been watered in a month.

After staring at me, standing there dumbfounded, for a moment, the mysterious man spoke in the politest tone he could muster. “My apologies, we aren’t quite open yet.”

“Th-there’s a green Jaguar outside.”

“Is there something wrong with my car?”

We’d only exchanged a few words, but it was enough. I was sure of it. I stared right at the man standing in front of me and said, “I’m not a customer. I was working here part-time until last month. My name is Seigi Nakata. My boss, Richard, suddenly disappeared and—”

“Oh, it’s you.” The man looked at me and nodded, though his expression didn’t really change. We had never met before, but he seemed to know about me. Which was just perfect, really, because I knew about him, too.

“You’re Richard’s mentor, Mr. Ranasinghe, aren’t you?”

The man looked a little surprised to hear me say that. I remembered Richard saying he’d learned Japanese at the same time as he’d learned about gemstones from his mentor, and that he’d borrowed his name, Ranasinghe,

from that mentor. This was the only possible conclusion I could come to.

The mustached man's dark eyes looked at me intently. He took his time, like he was trying to peer into my very soul. But then he smiled.

"That's interesting to hear. So he said he had a 'mentor,' did he? What makes you think I'm this 'mentor' person?"

"I don't *think* you're his mentor, I know you are. Your voices may be different, but you talk just like Richard."

"Indeed, Mr. Holmes. My name is Saul Ranasinghe Ali, and I am a humble jeweler from Sri Lanka. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"I'm Seigi Nakata from Takadanobaba."

We exchanged bows and shook hands. He squeezed my hand tight. It reminded me of greeting an opponent before a karate match.

"I'll cut right to the chase. Where is Richard right now, and what is he doing? He hasn't said a word to me, so I don't have any idea what's going on. Why is he doing this?"

"He didn't tell you anything?"

"Not a thing. He didn't even tell me that he was leaving, let alone why."

"That's not what I meant. He didn't talk to you at all before he left?"

"....."

What was with this guy? Talking to him made me feel strange. Like I had to make sure I was standing perfectly straight and carefully decipher every word he said before responding. Yeah, it was almost like...like I was being tested.

"...We talked on the phone a bit before he left."

"Indeed. And what did he say?"

That I'm too trusting and sometimes get myself hurt because of it, so I should listen to my head over my heart.

It was hard to take that as anything but "We'll never meet again. Goodbye."

"...I'm sorry, but I'd rather not say."

I looked at Saul more intently. It wasn't a glare, though. Pathetic as it was, I knew that if I had to say it out loud, I'd start crying. Even if I wasn't sitting in the passenger seat of his Jaguar.

Saul just smiled cheerfully, apparently unconcerned by my bad manners. It was different from Richard's jewel-like smile—more like the smile of some mysterious supernatural creature. It was honestly a little scary. Was I going to be in trouble? Richard had once said that he'd "love to meet someone who could comfortably defy his mentor," so I'd just assumed he was a large, athletic man. Apparently, the kind of power he wielded wasn't what I'd imagined.

Saul chuckled, seemingly noticing my hesitation.

"This'll probably take far too long to get through while standing in the doorway. I was only planning to clean the shop today, but why don't you come in and have a seat? We can chat over tea."

"I'll make it. And do the cleaning. I do work here, after all."

"Do you now? I thought you were no longer needed."

"He paid me through this month."

"Why, I could cry. Please, be my guest."

Saul gestured dramatically toward the kitchen.

The moment I set foot in the kitchen and saw the sink and the stove, the shelves and the refrigerator, I felt like something had forcefully seized me by the heart and shaken me. It had only been a month since I'd last been here, but I'd missed it so dearly, I could have died. I'd been worried about the refrigerator, but it was thankfully empty, and the shelves of sweets had been emptied of anything that wasn't shelf-stable. I shouldn't have expected any less from the Emperor of Sweets. The fact that he'd paid attention to such a detail meant he really still was the Richard I knew.

The thought snapped me back to reality—the Richard *I knew*?

"....."

Dwelling on it any further was pointless. I could tear my hair out about it at home later. Right now, I needed to focus on talking to Richard's mentor, and for

that, I needed to make tea. And I needed to make sure it was extra tasty.

I was about to start making royal milk tea, like I always did, when I realized there was no milk. I'd have to make regular tea instead, but for some reason, I had the feeling I'd be scolded for using the pan he'd left behind to make something so incomplete.

As I struggled with what to do, Saul poked his head in from the lounge.

"You've been in there forever. Does it take a hundred years to make a single cup of tea?"

"Sorry, we're out of milk."

"Oh, I see. So he's still a fan of royal milk tea, huh?"

Saul told me to move and took the pan from me. The way he filled the pan with water, added the tea leaves, and simmered them was the same as the process for making royal milk tea, but at the end, he pulled a box of spices that definitely wasn't there the last time I was in the kitchen off a shelf. It seemed to be a mix of various spices, and one heaping tablespoon of the mixture filled the kitchen with the smell of ginger, cinnamon, and other fragrances I associated with Indian restaurants. He simmered it like that for a bit, poured in a bunch of sugar, and just like that, it was done. I guess it was another kind of tea?

Saul dug around the cupboard, and his eyes landed on the pair of white cups—the Noritake ones with the gold banding. The ones Richard and I used. Before he could take them out, I slipped in next to him and grabbed a pair of cups that we used for customers. These were more appropriate. It just felt right.

I quickly offered him the cups, and Saul smiled again.

"Thank you, Mr. Nakata."

Saul filled the two cups with tea and encouraged me to return to the lounge. The red chairs and glass coffee table had been covered, so they were spotless, but the carpet was covered in dust. It might require a commercial-grade vacuum to get clean.

"So, what's going to happen to Étranger now?"

"I'll be looking after it. Admittedly, I have no plans to hire part-time help...but

go on, enjoy your tea.”

I nodded and took a sip of my tea—then pulled the cup from my mouth after just one taste. What on earth was this?

“I-It’s delicious!”

“Of course it is. It’s Sri Lankan spiced tea. You steep the tea with the spice mix while it’s still on the heat—it’s very good for you. Make sure you drink every last drop.”

I closed my eyes and brought the cup to my lips, kind of like I would when we were out drinking and one of my older classmates handed me a mug of beer. The flavor was rich and sweet. I was a little surprised by how hot it was, but it was delicious to drink as it cooled.

Still, I really would have liked to be drinking royal milk tea right now—royal milk tea I made myself in the shop of this kitchen. With a certain someone who wasn’t here.

Saul finished his tea before I did, but he wasn’t looking at me like he was craving a sweet treat. He just smiled at me.

“Now, what did you want to talk about?”

“I want to know where Richard is right now and what he’s doing.”

“Right to the point, huh. I see. So, what will you do with the answers to those questions?”

It took me a moment to process that, like the space in time between when you tossed a stone into a lake and when you heard the “plunk!” That was a good question. What was I going to do with the answers? What did I *want* to do?

I thought for a moment and chose my words carefully before throwing the stone back to him. “...I just need some closure to help me accept things. That’s why I want to know what happened to him.”

“Accept what exactly? The fact that he left without telling you anything? If that’s all, I don’t really see the point in knowing his current circumstances. Everyone has their own troubles to contend with. And whether those are things

others understand or don't is simply something we must deal with, in life."

"...I understand what you're saying, and I'll be the first to apologize for any trouble I might cause, but I'm not backing down."

I'd be exaggerating if I claimed I said that with the utmost confidence. But getting the answers I was looking for didn't feel completely out of reach. Richard wasn't the kind of man who'd do such a thing. He wouldn't abruptly cut ties with me by using a villainous line like that.

I couldn't even count all the examples of how kind and considerate he could be. He hesitated to sell gems to customers who didn't seem to truly want them, and he'd sell to the people he approved of even at a huge loss. I'd spent the last twenty years of my life being lectured by my mother, Hiromi, about not meddling in other people's business. But Richard? He was on a whole different level. It had to be a core part of his personality.

He wasn't the kind of man who'd just up and hurt someone like that for no reason. And if I was wrong about that, then why did he care about me so much?

He's a kind person. So kind, in fact, that sometimes I worry about him when he's with me.

Saul directed his piercing gaze at me—the one that seemed to penetrate the deepest recesses of my heart and then some—and then smiled.

"I see. You must've had some sort of arrangement with Richard other than your monthly salary. Did he promise to take you on vacation somewhere? A trip for two to the Maldives or something like that?"

"I'm sorry, I'm honestly just really freaked out. I can't take jokes like that right now."

"Trust me, I can tell. But what exactly are you 'freaked out' about, Mr. Nakata?"

"...Just, like, what if he got involved in some weird situation...or if someone conned him or something?"

Saul looked down for a moment before he began laughing, a great hearty chortle that made his belly jiggle. Was what I'd said really that strange? I

clenched my teeth, and Saul raised an eyebrow as he looked at me.

“This establishment is called ‘Étranger.’ Did your boss ever happen to tell you where it got that name?”

“Wait, Richard named it?”

“Oh, you didn’t even know that?”

I shook my head, and Saul nodded. Even the way he paused was identical to Richard. Richard must really trust this guy. Or *trusted* him, past tense, at least. I had to wonder how he felt about him now.

Admittedly, I didn’t really think he’d let him watch the shop if he didn’t trust him. Not that I had any proof of that.

“Étranger is French for ‘stranger.’ This is my third jewelry shop, but I thought Ranasinghe Jewelry would not be as appealing to a Japanese clientele. I’d always intended to have him run the place, so I gave Richard the honor of naming it. When I asked him why he selected the name, he said, ‘Because no matter where I go, I never feel like I belong.’ A bit pretentious, don’t you think?”

“.....”

“That said, it’s not inaccurate. In this country, folks like him and myself are always viewed as others. And as *foreigners*, we are the subject of curious gazes. I’m not criticizing you or your countrymen—I would never badmouth such good customers—but you lot are always drawing a kind of line between yourselves and people like us. Always reminding us that we will never truly belong. In a way, this shop has always been a place of solitude for Richard, and Richard alone, from the very start.”

A place of solitude.

I never knew Étranger had that kind of hidden meaning. But I kind of felt like I understood. And not just because he was a white man doing business in Japan but because he was so incredibly beautiful. Because he was so beautiful that his face could function as his business card, no matter where he went. His comment about a line being drawn between Japanese people and foreigners felt familiar too. But I had more important things to focus on—I had something I needed to tell him.

“I’m sorry, but there was a clause in the contract I signed when I was offered a part time job here. ‘Employees of this establishment are not to hold prejudiced views or make discriminatory remarks on the basis of a person’s race, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, or any other quality.’ Richard has been really good to me, and I’ve come to think of him like an older brother. I’ve never once thought of him as lesser or different because of who he is. So whatever you may think in general, I would appreciate it if you didn’t lump me in with this ‘us vs. them’ thing. And Richard, too, if you can bear to.”

Saul smiled when I said that. But it wasn’t that unsettling, monstrous smile. It was the kind of smile a teacher might give a student who passed a test. *I see it now—this is the man who mentored Richard, and a man Richard must still trust deeply.* And neither teacher nor pupil was the kind of person who could be dealt with in a straightforward manner. What a pain!

“Bravo. I must give my idiot student some credit for that. He’s done a wonderful job teaching such a promising young man.”

“I-Idiot student?”

“Let’s not get distracted.” Saul’s expression stiffened again, his eyes regaining the look of a teacher administering an exam. He was evaluating me. “The way you speak gives me great confidence in you. If, perhaps, I were to tell you where Richard is and what he is doing—”

“If you know, please, tell me!”

“Shut your mouth and listen. I’m speaking hypothetically. For some reason, I suspect that if I were to tell you where he is, you wouldn’t be able to leave it at that. In fact, I suspect that it would simply embolden your desires, and you’d begin talking about going to see him in person. You’ll become obsessed with the question *why?* and lose sight of everything else around you. Even though the answer has been staring you in the face all this time, you refuse to see, because it doesn’t sit well with you. Are you even aware of it?”

“Aware of...what?”

“That you’re in love with Richard.”

I felt like my heart had been torn from my chest with no warning.

No. No, come on. I mean, no. No. Just because I spend every waking moment thinking about him, just because my heart skips a beat every time I lay eyes on his face, just because I'm having dreams about him kissing me every night, it doesn't mean I'm in love with him. I couldn't be. I mean. Like—

I was stumped. Try as I might, I couldn't come up with a remotely convincing rebuttal.

“You’ve built him up into this perfect, beautiful crystal inside your own mind—you’re even projecting your own notion that ‘he’s not the kind of guy who would do that sort of thing’ onto reality. What does one call such a passionate emotional state, other than love?”

“...I’m not in love with him. That’s not what this is. I just—”

“Now, tell me, what happens to a young man flying on the wings of romantic dreams when he slams into the cold hard wall of reality? His delicate shell smashes into a million little pieces, scattering his contents every which way, just like an egg thrown against concrete! It takes quite a bit of time to recover from a blow like that. It would pain me to even witness it. And the cherry on top is all the trouble it would cause the people around you, too. Do you understand that?”

Saul stopped there. The pit of my stomach was still throbbing. I felt like I’d been alternating sips of icy and boiling water. My throat was burning, and probably not because of the spiced tea I’d drunk. It just felt like he’d stabbed me right through the heart, and even though we hardly ever turned on the heat in the shop, my back was already stained with sweat.

As I sat there in silence, Saul looked at me with eyes full of pity.

“I am simply worried about my pupil, as his teacher. If you were reunited with Richard and heard the reason he fled from his lips, what would happen if you felt you couldn’t accept it? Would you stab him or something to that effect?”

“That’s not funny.”

“Perhaps not to you. I do apologize if I’ve hurt your feelings.”

His black eyes sure didn’t suggest he was joking. His answer was a resounding “I’m not telling you.” That much was obvious. It was also clear that he knew

something. Even if he didn't know exactly where Richard had gone, he must've known something about his circumstances or his troubles.

"Look, I know I'm probably not thinking completely straight. I know I haven't really been myself since he disappeared. But that's no reason to fling wild accusations at me like that. I'm not going to stab him. I *might* give him a good smack on the back at most. Also, I'll have you know, I'm built of pretty sturdy stuff. I don't think I'd break into a million pieces if I got bashed into a wall—but I might put a hole in it."

"I think you've demonstrated as much. Anything else you need to get off your chest?"

"What else... I know. I feel relieved."

"In what respect?"

"I feel relieved knowing that Richard had a respectable mentor like you."

Saul looked a little surprised. I tried to copy that unsettling smile of his. He wouldn't punish me for pushing back like that, right?

I tried to put myself in his position. Think about what I would do if a weird Japanese part-timer I'd never seen before came to the shop and started pleading feverishly to know what happened to Richard. I didn't know exactly how long they'd known each other, but I had to imagine Richard's mentor had seen both men and women alike try to woo his beautiful student more than a few times... And Richard might have seemed unhappy about it, too. It wasn't really that hard to imagine why he might feel the need to drive away such people.

I was glad he wasn't the kind of mentor who would just spill the beans because the alternative was too much trouble. Truly. Especially because it meant my persistence might actually pay off.

I stood up and bowed my head in front of the glass coffee table—as deeply and politely as possible.

"Please, I have to know where he is. I'm at your mercy."

"Even if you might not get the closure you're looking for?"

“That’ll be my problem to sort out, then. But I’d rather that than be left not knowing what’s going on.”

“It seems nothing I say will make it through your thick skull. I see it now—you’re both quite similar. It’s no wonder you understand each other. Very well, then.”

He didn’t give me a chance to follow up on that “similar” comment. Who was I similar to? Did he mean Richard?

Saul disappeared into the back room for a bit before returning with a small box. Its pale blue velvet looked somewhat faded. He popped it open, revealing a ring with a fascinating design featuring six stones of varying hues set in a line. Were all six of the stones different? They looked the same to me. The cuts and setting looked a bit rough, so it must have been an older piece. An antique, maybe?

I searched the inside of the gold band, but there was no maker mark to be found. Saul handed me a flashlight when he saw me squinting. I guess he wanted me to be able to take a closer look at the stones.

“Does this ring look familiar to you?”

“...Not at all.”

“Really? It’s not ringing *any* bells?”

“.....”

I had nothing. I’d never seen the piece before. What on Earth was it? Obviously, it wasn’t a piece by a novice jewelry designer who’d just slapped in whatever stones they had handy—it must’ve been something significant, like my grandma’s ring, the first piece I ever showed Richard.

“...Did Richard leave this for me?”

“Oh, no. None of that nonsense. Send those notions right back to La La Land.”

“I was just asking. So, what is it then?”

“So you don’t know? Very well. Why don’t you take a closer look, Mr. Nakata?”

I raised my head when he said my name just like when a proctor calls your name during an exam. “Yes, sir,” I responded. Would I pass or would I fail? This was going to be the decisive moment.

“Would you mind telling me the names of those six stones, if you can?”

Saul tilted his head to the side a bit and smiled at me. Now my heart was pounding for an entirely different reason. Crap. He really was a teacher. And the way he thought was just like Richard, too—especially the way he brought out gemstones at a critical moment like this. Maybe I should think of this as an indirect test from Richard.

Fine. I'll give it a shot. There's no other way I'm breaking through this impasse.

There were six stones: a red one, a blue one, a pale green one, a violet one, a pink one, and a sparkling clear one. I was pretty sure I had some idea of what they *might* be, at least. You did pick up some things just through osmosis, after all.

“Can I start from the left? That’s a ruby, isn’t it?”

“Isn’t it?” I don’t know, you tell me.”

“It’s a ruby.”

“Okay. And the next one?”

“It’s a sapphi—no. It’s too opaque and the color is a little too pale...”

I looked at the ring from a different angle, trying to get a look at the bottom of the blue stone as best I could. I pointed the flashlight at it, and the color seemed to grow a bit paler. I felt like Richard had shown me this stone once or twice before. But what was it called? I tried to remember. I’m sure it was...

“Iolite.”

“Oh, I’m impressed. And the next one?”

That sounded like I was in the clear, for now. What a relief.

The third one was probably the most challenging. I felt like I’d at least seen the others before, but not this one. It was a sparkly, pale green stone, almost as transparent as quartz, but I’d never seen quartz in that color. It wasn’t an

emerald green but a refreshing mint—like the kind of mint ice cream you might find at an ice cream shop. It wasn't garnet or peridot. Those tended to be more yellowish green. Color-wise, it was close to jade, but I wasn't very confident about that. Did jade even come this translucent? Imperial jade was easy to mistake for emerald, but this stone was closer to turquoise. Though turquoise didn't sparkle like this...

As I thought through the possibilities, it hit me that, in what felt like no time at all, I really had seen mountains of gems. Just this spring, my grandmother's pink sapphire ring was the only gem I knew of—but now that I thought about it, I'd come such a long way from there. Admittedly, this wasn't really the time to be patting myself on the back.

Ultimately, I couldn't think of the name of the green stone. I was pretty sure I'd never seen that one before.

"Mr. Nakata?"

"...I don't know. I'll skip it and do the next one. It's an amethyst. I'm positive."

"Ooh, you don't think it might be a purple sapphire?"

"Not with that cut. A sapphire would have a much juicier color. It wouldn't look as crisp."

"You've got a knack for this. Very well. And the next one?"

"Rose quartz. I know this one. I even have some myself."

"I see. The last one is more of a bonus question."

"Diamond."

"Indeed. I would have asked you to leave if you'd gotten that one wrong."

I'd answered him, but the more I thought about it, the more mysterious the piece became. I'd never seen a ring set with stones in such a wide range of colors and hardness in a line like this. I occasionally saw ads for rings set with colorful stones on the train, but they were generally all a similar color, with taglines like "Easy to pair with any outfit!" This ring would definitely fail in that regard. It'd be more at home as a magic transformation item in a sentai hero series.

“I can’t quite offer you a ‘bravo’ this time. You missed one.”

“Can I take a picture and try again?”

“Absolutely not. Were you going to upload it on one of those popular social media sites and crowdsource the answer? While it is a most wonderful modern invention, it would be completely meaningless for this exercise.”

“Why?”

I frowned, and for a moment, Saul grinned from ear to ear. This smile reminded me of a wild animal trying to intimidate another creature.

“You don’t understand what that ring means. You may know the word ‘cup’ while holding a cylindrical piece of plastic, but if you don’t know what it’s *used* for, you don’t *really* know what the thing you’re holding is. What do you call such a person, if not a fool?”

“F-fool?”

“It’s just an example, but you’re similarly ignorant about Richard.”

I pressed my lips together. What did my ability to identify stones have to do with Richard?

“I just work here part-time. Richard wasn’t formally teaching me about gemstones.”

“You don’t need to dig your grave any deeper than it already is. Shut your mouth, and maybe even you’ll find your way out of that hole.”

He spoke almost like he was reading lines straight out of a piece of literature. Richard showed traces of that sort of affectation, but it was much stronger in his mentor. I was a little surprised it didn’t piss me off—maybe I’d just gotten too used to talking to Richard. Whenever he spoke like this, he was never actually as angry and frustrated as he might seem. Saul was probably the same. So maybe I still had a chance.

I gently put my hand on Saul’s arm to stop him as he started to put the ring away.

“If I can tell you the name of that stone, will you tell me where Richard is?”

Saul smirked at me in response. False kindness was painted all over his face. He wanted me to leave already, but he wouldn't say it. If Richard's prickly side were about 30 percent worse, it'd probably be close to this.

"What an interesting thing to say. Who would make you such a promise? I never even suggested that I'd give you that information if you could tell me the name of the stone?"

"I'll figure it out. I promise you."

"I think what you really need to do right now is take a good hard look at your own desires."

My own desires? Saul continued before I could ask a follow-up question.

"Take some time to ask yourself some questions—why *do* you want to see Richard so badly? Or is that a question you can't find the answer to by looking in the mirror?"

"I just can't accept things the way they are."

"Well, *I* can't accept that answer. That's a *you* problem—you said as much yourself. Then tell me this, what is it you hope for after you find your closure? An apology from Richard? Or to repair your relationship?"

"I..."

I actually hadn't given any thought to what I wanted to do after I found him. I just wanted to free myself from the hell I'd found myself in. I wanted to know why Richard did what he did, but beyond that, what *did* I want?

I held my tongue for a bit, and Saul sighed loud enough that I could hear.

"Good lord, I knew the Japanese were bad at verbalizing their intentions, but I never would have thought the youth would be quite *this* bad! What on Earth are they teaching you in school here? It's deplorable. Oh, pardon me, such comments are against the rules of this establishment. As proprietor, I must exact an appropriate penalty."

Saul went through a kaleidoscopic range of expressions, like an actor performing a one-man play, finishing with a smile at my bewildered self. Almost like he was trying to console an underperforming student.

“Come back here next Saturday. Use that time to work on polishing your conversational skills to the level of your tea-making, Mr. Nakata. The only person in the world who can explain your own desires is you, after all. But for now, please take your leave already.”

Already? I looked up at the clock on the wall. Twelve thirty. I felt a strange sensation wash over me. I was sure I arrived at the shop around eleven. I felt like I’d time-traveled, but my growling stomach reminded me that nothing of the sort had happened.

“...I still need to do some cleaning.”

“That will be quite all right. I’m a bit of a neat freak myself, and I simply cannot stand when other people don’t clean to my standards. I’d prefer not to have to do it all over again. I heard it’s supposed to get down into winter temperatures tonight. Do you have a coat? My idiot pupil may have hired you of his own accord, but that does make you, in a sense, one of my employees. Some level of concern for your well-being is part of my job.”

I was at a loss for words. I didn’t know how many years Richard had worked under Saul, but considering the similarity of their speech patterns, Richard undoubtedly trusted him a great deal. All I could really do at this point was do my best to earn his approval.

“...I’ll be back next week. You can count on it.”

“Very well. I’ll be here around eleven-thirty. I do have business to attend to later in the day, though, so let’s try to wrap it up before two.”

“Got it.”

I bowed my head and thanked him before leaving Étranger.

I slipped out onto Ginza’s Chuo-doori and just kept walking—in the opposite direction from Shimbashi Station. If I kept going, I’d end up at Tokyo Station. By the time I got to about where the National Film Archive was, I stopped for a bit. An acquaintance in the art department who was studying film told me you could come here to see old movies for cheap. Even though I was basically right in the heart of the capital, there thankfully weren’t very many people around, making it perfect for wandering around aimlessly.

After I lost my cool and called up Mr. Homura when Richard vanished, I asked him why he said what he did. Why he told me that Richard must really like me. And not in the friendship sense.

Mr. Homura fell quiet for a moment before confessing that he had suggested Richard get a new part-timer. He'd done so as Richard had made a sales visit to his residence—apparently, Mr. Homura didn't think my attitude or speaking style was very appropriate for a jewelry store in Ginza. That was really none of his business, but I had to admit I agreed. *Elegant* was probably the last word anyone would ever use to describe me, and my attempts at proper customer service tone were pretty tragic. Not all of our customers appreciated that, and some side-eyed me for calling Richard by his first name. Admittedly, those people were in the minority, given the very international character of Étranger's customer base...but still.

Yet Richard simply smiled at Mr. Homura and shook his head, telling him that he didn't want anyone else by his side but me. And he asked Mr. Homura not to tell me that he'd said that.

Mr. Homura explained that that was where he'd gotten the impression. I was left completely flabbergasted, standing there in front of an empty Étranger. I thought it was just a misunderstanding. He didn't like *me*; he liked the pudding and milk agar jelly I made. But Mr. Homura didn't know that, so he'd just misunderstood. It had to be. I mean, if it wasn't a misunderstanding, then what? How would that make me feel about Richard?

Did I love him? Me? In love with Richard? That was impossible. I loved Tanimoto. But then why was I having those dreams every night? Was I in love with him? Was that it? Was I being an emotional two-timing bastard without even realizing it? No. No, that was the last thing I needed to be thinking about. I needed to focus on figuring out what that stone was.

I decided to contact Tanimoto. Tanimoto...every time I thought about her, my heart skipped a beat. Richard was always giving me romantic advice, even though it annoyed him, too. *No, focus on the stone.*

Where exactly was the line between love and friendship, anyway?

I mean, you heard people talk about falling for their friends all the time. Was

it just a gender thing? It was so old-fashioned these days to assume people could only be in romantic relationships with members of the opposite sex. That's right—the last time we were together, Richard told me about his failed romance. He'd kept it pretty vague, saying only that their relationship essentially fell apart due to external pressure. But I'd only just realized that he never actually mentioned the person's gender.

I thought I was fine this time, but the moment I stepped out of *Étranger*, Richard's shadow loomed large over my thoughts. It wasn't the real Richard, though, just my own conception of him. I was so fixated on him that I was completely at his mercy. Even thinking about Tanimoto had tormented me at times—I just wanted to die when I thought she might get married—but I couldn't even compare the torture I was going through now to that.

Was it even possible to quantify and compare the trouble entirely different people and circumstances caused you? Only the pain would never go away. Was this love, too?

So, does that mean I'm in love with Richard? No, I mean, the person I want to date is Tanimoto. But I care so much about Richard, too—no, I can't keep doing this. My mind isn't working.

I felt like I was lost in a hell of my own design.

I needed to figure out the name of that stone. When I searched “green gemstone” online, the results were nothing but emeralds and malachite, and I was sure that stone was neither. I decided to take a look at a mineral visual reference book in a couple of days—it might at least give me a photo to go off of.

As I finally began to pull myself together, I sensed someone approaching from behind. Whoever it was, they were walking toward me at a pretty fast pace. It made me remember my karate classes from when I was a kid. “Remember, Seigi,” an instructor had once told me, “purse snatchers and molesters approach people from behind at high speed, and they don't act like they're going to stop.”

I wondered if that instructor was doing well now? I sure wasn't. But I did still remember the self-defense skills he taught me.

When I turned around, there was a man approaching me. He aggressively grabbed me by the shoulder.

“Hey! You! Let me see your faaaaaaaace!”

I started by grabbing his wrist and twisting it a bit. After a beat, I had it pulled behind his back. Typically, this caused excruciating pain and immobilized your opponent. If I executed a foot sweep next, it'd be a perfect win, but we weren't in a dojo with tatami floors, so I wasn't about to go that far. But I did give his arm another little twist.

“Owwwww!”

“Is that how you approach a stranger? Are you peddling some kind of scam? Well, you picked the wrong guy.”

“No! No! Let me goooo! You're hurting me, like seriously! You're gonna break my arm! Please! Lemme go!”

“I'll loosen my grip a little.”

I let up on him a little, and the brown-haired man pitched forward, whining. He looked about thirty and was dressed pretty shabbily. If he wasn't trying to scam me, what was he doing?

“Ahh, shit...I feel like I've been through hell...”

“What a coincidence, I've been feeling the same way myself lately. Have we met somewhere?”

“Don't play dumb! I'm...wait, what name was I going by when we met?”

“Oh, right, you were something Sasaki.”

I remembered now—he was the con man, Sasaki. His real first name was Yoshitsuna. He'd been working for those scammers selling fake turquoise through romance fraud, the ones Richard and I had threatened in costume.

Apparently, they'd gone out of business. Rest in peace. By sheer coincidence, Yoshitsuna had happened to come into Étranger after that, lamenting that his employer had up and disappeared, leaving him high and dry. He hightailed it out of the shop about three seconds after he recognized Richard.

I was pretty sure I'd been calling myself "Mr. Yamada" for the entirety of that ruse.

I let go of him. The con man chuckled and shoved his hands into his pockets as he put some distance between us. It didn't look like he was trying to run, though. He seemed to want to talk.

"Who woulda thought I'd run into you here? You're gonna take the fall for a real bad guy, Yamada. What you and your boss did to me could count as obstruction of business! That's a crime, you know! You could be a felon!"

"What?"

The incident was almost a fond memory at this point. Obstruction of business, huh? You usually heard that come up when the authorities went after yakuza members for roughing up shops and stuff like that. This Sasaki guy would have to drag me to the police first to come after me on a charge like that. I had to wonder how well that would work out for him. He had to have victims other than the woman I knew, not to mention other crimes. Was going to the police really such a good idea? Seemed more like he was only going to end up hurting himself. He'd almost certainly be the one in real trouble if they investigated the claims at all.

I stared him right in the eye with that in mind, and the con man smirked like he was planning something.

"You sure are calm. You really think you'll be fine, huh? I know what's up, you know. I know that shop you were at is closed right now. And to top it all off, your boss is gone. Am I wrong? And I don't mean he's not in Ginza; I mean he left the country."

Sasaki smiled when he saw my surprise, very pleased with himself for hitting the nail on the head. We weren't even thinking about remotely the same thing, so it didn't even make me angry. I was just a little curious—how did *he* know that?

I asked as much, and Sasaki nodded and pulled a wallet from his raggedy jacket. He took a piece of paper folded into quarters out of the receipt pocket. It looked like a blown-up printout of a smartphone photo of a person. Someone's head was in the camera's way, but it was a full body shot of a man in

a suit.

It was Richard.

He had his black-wheeled suitcase with him and was looking down at some documents he held. There was a large board with a bunch of numbers on it behind him—he must've been in an airport. In fact, a sign beneath the board read “Narita: Terminal 1.” He looked almost unrecognizable with that gloomy look on his face, but I knew the suit. It was the same one he was wearing the day he disappeared.

There was a date in the lower right. A date I would never forget—that day one month ago. I could read the large lettering on the documents he carried. There was a ticket with NRT written on it—an airport code, which I was well acquainted with via the tags on Étranger's overseas customers' bags. I know NRT was Narita, but what airport was LHR?

“Clearly, he's quitting the con-man gig because business has dried up! You see that online ticket he's holding? That code is for London Heathrow airport—you know that? That's an airport in England! Which means your boss isn't in the country right now, which means he left you all by your lonesome here in Japan. Listen up, Yamada, buddy, I've got a bunch of big scary, worked-up dudes backing me.”

“I'll have you know!”

I grabbed both of Sasaki's arms and jolted him as hard as I could. He shouted at me angrily, so I had no choice but to put him in an arm lock. In the blink of an eye, the con man was on the ground, groaning in pain. *Sorry*. I was just so happy, I couldn't help myself.

“I'll have you know, you just did me a huge favor! So thank you! Thank you, so much!”

“Ow, ow, ow, that really hurts, let me go, please! Stop! It huuurts!”

“My heart feels like it could just burst! I don't even know what to say!”

“What the hell is wrong with you?! Sorry, I was lyin' about bein' backed by the yakuza, okay? Sorry!”

“Do you think I don’t know that already? I know you owe them money on the illegal loans they sold you. If anyone’s running from the yakuza, it’s you.”

“What the?! You better watch your back, Edward Baxter—wait, no, what was your boss’s real name again? Richard Claremont?”

I snatched the page with the image on it out of Sasaki’s hands. His passport wasn’t in the photo. The only legible text in the shot was the large airport codes on his ticket. Which meant...

“Where did you find that name?”

“What, you mean your Master Richard’s name? What exactly do you think a con man gets up to in his free time?”

“Now I’m just talking to myself here, but self-defense is the sort of skill you need to exercise with restraint. Though I must admit I did make it all the way to black belt.”

“L-Let’s solve this peacefully! I’m a peace-lover, okay!”

“What a coincidence, I love peace, too. Now tell me where you heard that name.”

“...Names aren’t anything secret.”

He was lying. As far as I knew, Richard had always gone by Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian here. “Richard Claremont” was something of a taboo, from his perspective. The business card he gave the police in Harajuku the night we met was one of his Étranger cards, not his passport with the Claremont surname on it.

“You snapped that photo at the perfect moment, so how’d you know Richard would be at the airport at that time?”

“Someone tipped me off that the guy you were lookin’ for might be there.”

“Someone like who?”

“I ain’t tellin’ you.”

I glared at him, and the con man took a half step back. “Please,” I groaned, as if talking in my sleep while having a nightmare, and Sasaki muttered “shit”

under his breath. I took a step forward, begging him again.

On my third plea, my bizarre mood had Sasaki backed into a corner. Thanks to my karate instructor, I was well acquainted with just how much those self-defense skills could hurt, even when applied with restraint.

“I-I don’t know! Some guy just approached me when he found out I was lookin’ for that handsome jeweler and gave me the info. I got nothin’ else to tell you!”

“Was this ‘guy’ Japanese? Or a foreigner? Was he white or dark-skinned?”

“Hey, now, I ain’t so low that I’m about to spill a client’s personal info—no, hold on, wait, stay back! Stay back, okay! He was a white guy! He looked like he was from the same place as Richard!”

A white guy. Good. I didn’t have to be suspicious of Saul, then. But who could it have been? Someone else was looking for Richard? And why had Richard been hiding his name this whole time?

I was sure he had a more serious reason for not using the Claremont name than simply hating his family. He never told me why he wouldn’t use the name exactly, but there’s no reason he would go to all that trouble without a good reason. Why was he using a fake name?

That reminded me—my mother, Hiromi, had used a different name for a while as well. But that was something she needed to do to get away from my abusive dad.

Was Richard running from someone, too?

Sasaki stared at me as my mind ran wild in the space between speculation and utter delusion. The con man sighed, exasperated, when I finally snapped out of it.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t know where your boss went.”

“I had no idea. I don’t even know if the shop is going to reopen.”

“Dang, brother, your crooked boss kicked you to the curb too?! Man, that sucks. Was lookin’ forward to shakin’ down that blond bastard.”

“Hey.”

“I’m kidding, man. Seems like we’ve both got rotten taste when it comes to pickin’ jobs though. But, you know, maybe this is the universe tryin’ to tell us something. We should be friends. Wanna grab a beer later? Your treat.”

I shot him an icy glare, and Sasaki wrapped his arms around himself and pulled away. He probably didn’t want to end up on the receiving end of another of my self-defense techniques. Rotten taste when it came to picking jobs? He sure had a knack for being way off the mark. I had absolutely no regrets about working for Richard.

“You don’t have to look so scared. I’m not going to touch you again. But honestly, I’m glad I ran into you. You really did me a huge favor. I had no idea where on Earth he might even be...”

“What difference does it make, knowin’ where he went? He’s in England—that’s practically the other side of the world. I think he got away scot-free.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. I mean, after all, if I know where he is...”

I could hop on a plane and find him.

I mumbled that to myself, and Sasaki looked astonished.

“You...really oughta cool your head a little. That flight’ll be way more money than whatever back pay he owes you. I dunno how much you were ripped off for, but you’re still young, man, you can start over. It’s not worth it.”

“I wasn’t ripped off. I just want to see him. He wouldn’t do that sort of thing.”

The moment I said that, I could sense Sasaki come to some sort of realization. It wasn’t the kind of reaction you’d expect from a conman—it was almost like pity, or concern. *What? What did I do that’s so wrong?*

“So like, Yamada, my man, I’m talkin’ from experience here, and not in a business context.”

“I’m not really interested in whatever you have to say.”

“So, there are people like me—players—guys with a talent for pickin’ up chicks. But then there are guys who’ve got game, irrespective of gender. Understand?”

“I don’t and I don’t care.”

“Well, just listen anyway. Guys like that, they’re no saints. They’ve all got some massive flaws, even if those flaws are usually directly related to what makes ’em so charming. And they’re real good at making the people around them think, ‘What’ll happen to him if I’m not around?’ Now, they might not even be doin’ it intentionally, but the people around them are so convinced it’s true, it’s almost like there’s a spell on them. Maybe it’s less game and more like a pheromone or somethin’. Just like being born with a magnetically handsome face.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, but I’ve heard enough. Do you really want me to hurt you again? I’ll roundhouse-kick you this time.”

“If you hit me with something like that, I’d wind up in the hospital and you’d wind up in jail. Take a chill pill. That guy’s a way more cunning con artist than me—he’s a gigolo, a player with top-tier game. I’m sure of it.”

“He’s not that kind of person!”

My voice echoed like a shriek. Customers coming out of the coffee shop on the other side of the four-lane road between us stopped in their tracks to stare. Sasaki looked at me like I was so pathetic he couldn’t bear the sight, then clicked his tongue.

“Lookin’ at your dumb face makes me feel sick. I keep seein’ the faces of the women I’ve conned. Here’s some advice: turn that piece of paper into a memento, go find yourself a girlfriend, and fall in love. See ya.”

I stared at my white notebook, surrounded by the silence of the university library. My notebook was surrounded by three different visual reference books on minerals. I’d scanned through most of them, but couldn’t find any examples of the mystery stone. There were a few that looked similar, but I didn’t know enough to narrow it down. I didn’t have the stone with me, or even any photos of it.

I was trying to sort out the contents of my mind. The most pressing problem I had to solve at the moment was figuring out the name of that stone. I knew that, but my mind kept wandering off in a different direction. So maybe I needed to resolve that first. Specifically...

...Why did I want to see Richard again so badly?

Was I in love with him? Really? Is that really what this restless, irrepressible feeling was? Honestly, it felt a lot closer to the unease you might feel if a relative failed to contact you after a natural disaster or something. That fear of never being able to see them again. But Richard *had* said something to me before he disappeared—a message that had clearly been a combination of “farewell” and “don’t come after me.”

As I pored over it all, I started to wonder if I shouldn’t pursue him after all.

I could afford the trip from Narita to Heathrow if I went with a budget airline. The ticket would be about 50,000 yen, but that didn’t include lodging or other expenses, and I wasn’t sure a quick there-and-back would really work to search for someone. That takes time. And money. Even if Saul knew exactly where he was and I managed to get that information out of him, there’s no guarantee he’d be in the same place a whole month later.

The more realistically I tried to think about it, the more I started to feel like I was never going to get the closure I was looking for. Everyone was dealing with their own personal issues. Even Richard. Even me.

So maybe it would be for the best if I just give up. Maybe I should listen to my head instead of my heart. Maybe that’s just how life is. That’s what he told me to do, after all, so maybe I should listen to him.

If he knew I was doing stupid things like comparing airfares, getting all my assignments through winter break done in a week and packing, he’d be so dumbfounded, he wouldn’t know what to say. It’s not like I wasn’t aware of how stupid I was being. But I just couldn’t think about anything else. My entire being was focused on getting to where Richard was, and I just wanted it to stop. I just had to do something. It was the only option. But despite all that, was I really—really—going to give up? Could I?

I was completely out of sorts. My mind was a sloppy mess, like a pot of curry. I held my head in my hands and sighed. Then I heard someone laugh in front of me. The voice sounded tender.

“You don’t look like you’re doing so hot, huh?”

I looked up and found an angel standing before me. And angel with a suave smile.

“Tanimoto...when did you get here?”

“A while ago. Seigi, do you have a moment?”

She led me out of the library to the café nearby. She ordered a cream soda, mumbling that it was starting to get cold, so this was probably going to be her last chance to have one this year.

“I’ve been so worried about you. You’ve been in the library with all those books open, looking like the world’s about to end.”

“.....”

“If there’s anything I can help with, I’d be more than happy to listen,” she said with a smile.

I almost burst into tears the moment she said that. I wanted to tell her so badly. I wanted to just tell her everything. I just desperately needed to talk to *someone*.

“So, the guy I work for part time... No, um, I mean someone who’s done a lot for me... No, that’s not it either. Someone I care about deeply... Look, I don’t really know how to describe him exactly, but he just suddenly vanished and I don’t know what to do.”

“Is this the guy who let me see his sports car a while back? That foreigner?”

I gave a silent, shaky nod and began to spill my guts about everything. I started with how I’d met Richard that spring and told her about how much fun I had working at his shop in Ginza, and how I’d developed a love of gemstones because of him, and how he always supported me, and how he loved sweets, and how even though he was always eating these luxurious little confections, his favorite of all was the pudding I made. I told her how happy that had made me, and that even though I wasn’t a particularly skilled cook, I came to work every week with a box of treats for him.

And then I explained how just a month ago, he’d left me with a single phone call before vanishing like a puff of smoke. I told her that he was probably in

London, from what I had gathered, but that that was all the information I had to go on, That for some reason, I had this unbearable urge to go after him. But even I wasn't sure why I wanted to go after him so badly, or what I wanted to do when I found him, and it was driving me crazy.

That should have been more than enough information to give her, but my lips just wouldn't stop. Until I started talking, I hadn't even realized that the thing bothering me most of all was that I had no outlet for my emotions. I'd never realized how awful it was to be tormented by your own feelings until now. Tanimoto was the last person I wanted to tell all this to. I hated it. But who else would listen to all this? And in that moment, I was like a car with no brakes.

"I really don't understand why I'm so torn up about this. Why is it bothering me so much? He's not family and we're not dating, but I... Is this love?"

"Well, Seigi, do you love him?"

I wanted to tell her, *No, the one I love is you*, but I wasn't even sure if that was how I actually felt anymore. But why? What could I even say? Nothing made any sense.

"I don't know... I really don't know... I don't understand anything about myself at all anymore..."

"Really? I think I have an idea."

"Uh?"

I flinched a bit. Tanimoto looked at me with her big, bright, black eyes and said, "Let's forget about whether to call it love or whatever for now, but I think what you're feeling at the moment is really pretty simple. You're not confused; you're angry."

"...I am?"

"You're frustrated because someone you care about very much betrayed you. You want to know why they disappeared in such a hurry and why they wouldn't talk to you about it. You want to know why they didn't come to you for help if something was wrong. But you're a kind person, Seigi, and you don't know what he's going through, so even though you're not family or dating, you refuse to let yourself be mad at him. And you're disappointed that maybe this person you

care about so much doesn't feel the same way about you, but you won't let yourself just feel that either. That's what's causing the dissonance in your heart and why you can't figure out how you feel. But your frustration isn't going anywhere. The pressure's broken through the bedrock of your heart. And as the person standing right on the fault line, you're constantly being rocked by quakes."

"....."

"But maybe I'm wrong."

Tanimoto tilted her head to the side bashfully. I couldn't say another word. I felt a strange sensation, like a stream of cool water had been poured deep into my chest—and then it'd come roaring back up in a torrent a hundred times its original volume. I found myself shutting my mouth, as if to hold it in. But it wasn't because I felt like puking. I felt like I was about to cry. What was this feeling? Is closure really such a violent sensation?

"Are you okay?"

"He... He! I wanna..."

"You wanna what?"

"I wanna punch him in the face!"

"Oh, uh, Seigi you might want to keep it down a little."

"I want to knock his lights out! He has no idea how much he made me worry! Where does he get off telling me that I'm 'too trusting' and that's going to get me 'hurt'! How dare he say that?! If he hadn't been such a good guy and if he hadn't been so kind to me, why would I have trusted him?! I want to tell him it's all his damn fault! I...I... Why do I..."

"Why do you...?"

"Why do I care about him so much..."

I cast my eyes down at the tabletop. The shop owner approached our table, probably spooked by my sudden outburst, but Tanimoto bowed and said I was fine. *This sucks. I'm not fine. I'm the only one here who is absolutely not fine.*

I cared about him. I worried about him because I cared about him, and that

was why he made me so angry and frustrated and sad. Why didn't he say anything to me? Did he not bother because he didn't care about me at all? Then why was he so nice to me? The more I thought about it, the more I felt like I was being told I didn't have the right to worry about him, and that was just too much for me to bear. I couldn't help wondering if he'd only treated me so well because he knew this was temporary. Maybe, somewhere in the back of his mind, he'd been expecting to leave like this all along. Was that why he hired a random stranger he ran into on the street at night? Was that why he didn't want to hire anyone else—why it had to be me? So he wouldn't have to feel guilty about tossing me aside at a moment's notice?

There's no way. He's not that kind of person. But—

—ultimately, that was just what I believed.

I don't know if it's romantic love. All I know for sure is that I care about him deeply. I wish it were easier to just put a neat little label on different kinds of affection—this is familial love, this is neighborly love, this is the love I feel for a romantic partner. What kind of love would this be? I can't identify it, just like I can't identify that mysterious stone.

I must have sat there in silence for an awkwardly long time, because Tanimoto started talking again, her voice gentle.

"Hey, Seigi, have you ever heard of the Salzburg Branch or crystallization?"

"...You mean like in the gemological sense?"

"Well, there is that, too, but I'm talking more in the context of French literature."

I told her I had no idea. She smiled sweetly, then explained that Salzburg was a town in Austria. It was the birthplace of Mozart and is famous for its music festival, but its proximity to a large rock salt mine was the primary point of interest for Tanimoto.

Rock salt—salt that came from the ground. Which meant the place used to be under the ocean long, long ago. The town's name was a combination of the words for "salt" and "fortress". A fortress of salt. Apparently, there was a relevant anecdote about the place.

“A plain, ordinary tree branch was left in the salt mine. When it was retrieved two or three months later, the branch was transformed—so encrusted in salt crystals that it looked like it was made of diamonds, not wood. It sparkled when it caught the light. It was so beautiful. You couldn’t even see the branch inside the salt anymore. That’s what the Salzburg Branch refers to.”

“...Are they a famous regional export or something?”

“No, silly, it’s about love.”

I looked a little surprised. Tanimoto lowered her voice, explaining with a smile that she didn’t understand it, so she’d done a lot of studying. That was something I was never going to forget. The girl I was in love with felt like romantic love was something that had nothing to do with her, and she had no interest in indulging in it herself. It was a secret she’d revealed to me right before Richard disappeared.

She was always an adorable angel to me. But in that moment, Tanimoto looked like a slightly different kind of angel—like the big, important kind that handed down divine revelations.

“Stendhal wrote about it in his book titled *De L’Amour*. About how there are different stages of love that are all part of a process he called ‘crystallization.’ It’s about how love can make us blind to certain realities—how, when someone really, really likes someone, they start to think they’re perfect. The branch is a plain, ordinary branch. But with the salt crystals—love—stuck to it, it becomes a sparkling, magical branch.”

A living gemstone.

That was how I saw Richard. Every time he told me there was no such thing, I’d always respond by saying that looking at him made me feel the same way I did when looking at a beautiful natural phenomenon. Not that he ever took me particularly seriously. Was Tanimoto trying to say that my seeing him like that was like the Salzburg Branch?

“D-does it mean...you’re in love with someone...romantically...when that happens?”

Then I really was in love with him. Which meant I really was emotionally two-

timing—

“I don’t think so, at least.”

Tanimoto vanquished my despair with a single phrase. *Huh? It’s not? Then what is it?*

“I mean, it’s not like that sort of thing is exclusive to the context of romantic love. It happens in all kinds of relationships, doesn’t it? I don’t understand what it means to feel romantic love, but I understand crystallization, for sure.”

“Oh...yeah, you’re right.”

When you admired someone, every little thing they did seemed impossibly cool—but you wouldn’t think twice if you saw someone else do the same thing. I supposed that sort of cognitive bias was what Tanimoto was describing with the Salzburg branch anecdote. It definitely wasn’t the sort of thing that only happened in the context of romantic love.

“Seigi, are you angry that this person you care about, respect, and wanted to have only positive feelings for disappointed you in the end?”

“No. I’m not angry. I’m—”

I didn’t finish the sentence. Tanimoto just sat there and quietly waited for me to continue. She already knew what I was going to say. I wasn’t frantically trying to preserve a sparkling twig in the salt mine of my heart—it was time for me to leave that dark cavern and turn my eyes to the light of the sun.

“I care about him...and he helped me out so many times... I’ve just always wanted to do something to be useful to him, for once. I wanted to at least stay with him...until I got that chance.”

It wasn’t until I said it out loud that I finally realized it.

This was the second time I’d tasted a feeling I couldn’t escape. It wasn’t as strong as the last time either, back in high school, when Grandma died. She suffered all the way to the end, and there’d been nothing I could do to help her.

I was just a high schooler back then. The thought of being in the same position again in college was mortifying.

“So, um, you were talking about going to London?”

“Oh, um, yeah...”

“I think you should go.”

My face suddenly grew serious. Tanimoto was looking right at me. It certainly didn't seem like she was joking—not that she was the type to make that kind of joke in the first place. My black-haired angel reiterated her comment.

“I think you should go, be it London or wherever he is.”

“But why? I mean...there's like no chance I'll even be able to find him...”

“I mean, yeah, but that's not how you really feel now, is it?”

How I really felt?

Tanimoto started explaining as I sat there, dumbfounded.

“The whole time you were talking, there was one thing I couldn't get out of my head—I think I see you kinda like you see him. You're someone really important to me, who can do things I can't do. You're kind. You sometimes struggle with things all by yourself, and get yourself into trouble in the process, so I worry about you. If you suddenly called me, said, ‘I'm never going to see you again, but be strong and keep living your life, even if people hurt you,’ and then disappeared, there's no way I'd be able to accept that. I'd go after you. Because the Seigi I know isn't the kind of person who would do something like that. Because if the Seigi I know *were* to do something like that, he'd have to have a really good reason for it. And he'd have to have a really good reason for not coming to me for help, too. Plus, there's no way it wouldn't hurt the Seigi I know to have to do something like that. He wouldn't want to say goodbye like that. If I found even a hint of his trail, I'd follow him to Madagascar, or Australia, or wherever. It would make me anxious, of course, but I could just ask the locals to try to find you—‘Have you seen a really kind Japanese man with black hair around twenty years old and about 170 centimeters tall?’ Piece of cake.”

Tanimoto giggled shyly. The light streaming in from the café door outlined her figure in a gentle white light.

“Of course, I'd know I might not find you. Or that seeing you again wouldn't be a happy occasion. Maybe I'd get an earful from you for doing something so stupid, or maybe I'd just be causing you trouble. But even knowing all that, I'd

rather try than leave things as they were. I mean, if I thought I might never see you again, I don't think I'd be *able* to do anything else. I just couldn't take it. I couldn't accept it."

"I guess it's like Machiavelli said... 'It is better to act and repent, than not to act and regret.'"

"Did he say that? But, yeah, something like that."

And the person who taught me that quote was none other than Richard himself. It was what he told me when I went to him for advice about Tanimoto.

Tanimoto bashfully continued, "If someone asks you, 'Why are you going to so much trouble for someone who isn't family or your significant other?' then why don't you try telling them this? 'He's a dear friend of mine, and I want to see him again. That's why I'm looking for him.'"

She smiled at the end.

It was like an angel had neatly arranged the messy contents of the curry pot that was my mind into a tidy lunch box. And that lunch box had turned out a lot prettier than I'd expected, which kind of made me want to cry.

Tanimoto smiled at me apologetically as I stood there, completely flabbergasted.

"Sorry for babbling so much. But let me say one last thing: No one else gets to decide if what you're feeling is love or not. Only your heart gets to decide that. I know what it's like to panic and reach for the first available answer when you don't know something, but it doesn't matter if someone else tells you, 'Yes, it is love,' or 'No, it's not.' *You're* the master of your own heart. Plus, just because you like someone a whole lot doesn't always mean it's romantic. I'm not a fan of everything being lumped into that one category... Oh, man, I can't believe I ran my mouth so much about something that wasn't rocks. This seems to happen a lot when I'm with you, Seigi. Sorry about that."

"You don't need to apologize, really. Tanimoto, I...I don't know what I should even say."

"I'm glad you talked to me about it, Seigi. It was so obvious to me that you were angry—sometimes it helps to get an outside perspective, you know?"

“Thank you. I...I really like you. I’m so glad we met.”

“Ooh, I’m so glad you feel that way! I really like you, too, Seigi. I’ve never been in love before, and the idea still scares me, but the thought of you being there to watch over me gave me the courage to consider giving it a shot. I’ll make sure you’re the first to know if I get a boyfriend while you’re away.”

“I-Is there someone you, uh, had in mind already?”

“Huh? Oh, no, no one yet. I guess I’m just feeling more enthusiastic about the idea is all.”

Tanimoto flashed an awkward smile. I felt a little relieved. I mean, sure, I’d be crushed if she contacted me while I was roughing it in London to tell me she’d gotten a boyfriend. But I was pretty sure I’d be able to get through it—because she’d said I was a dear friend. She said she really liked me. She liked me as much as I liked Richard. That was more than enough for me right now. My heart was so full.

So now I could focus on thinking about someone else.

I decided to go after Richard. Never seeing him again didn’t sit right with me.

Having worked through all that, I suddenly remembered what I was doing in the library with these reference books. Sitting right in front of me was the Angel of Rocks and Minerals. I needed her help.

So on that note.

“Tanimoto, you mentioned that Salzburg branch thing earlier, but are there any other minerals that crystallize on another material like that?”

“Umm, well, with the branch in question, it’s the humidity that deposits the salt on the wood... Are you talking about how calcite and quartz or siderite and pyrite are often found growing together?”

I nodded, pretty sure that was what I was thinking of, and Tanimoto nodded in kind. A somber shadow crossed her sweet face, and creases appeared beneath her eyes.

“There definitely are minerals like that. The easiest example is probably quartz, since you can see through it to the base rock, which can make the

quartz an unusual color. Some people collect specimens like that.”

“So there might be some kind of mint-colored quartz out there, huh?”

“Mint? Can you be more specific?”

I did my best to verbally describe the color of the mystery stone. I told her it was set in a gold ring and that it was a pale green, like mint ice cream. I told her that it looked kind of like quartz at a glance, but I’d never seen quartz of that color before. And also that I wasn’t allowed to take a photo.

“Maybe it’s synthetic? It does seem weird to go out of your way to use something like that in that ring though.”

“I don’t think it would have anything like that in it. The ring looked pretty old.”

“And you weren’t allowed to take a picture? I can’t help but think there might be something to that.”

“Like what?”

“I mean, it’s just the name of one stone, right?” she said, matter-of-factly. “Photo or no photo, you have a whole week to figure it out, right? You could go to a museum, or even talk to a gemologist.”

She did have a point. Posting a photo online wasn’t the only way to get information. There probably was *someone* out there I could talk to who would be able to identify it just based off my memories of the stone.

“Then...maybe the stone’s name isn’t the real question?”

“It might not be. The ring might have some special meaning.”

A ring with a special meaning. Right, what did Saul say again? Even if you knew the word ‘cup,’ if you didn’t know its purpose, you’d be a fool who didn’t know what to do with a cup even if he were holding one. But what did he mean by that?

“The ring is pretty weird, though. It had a bunch of different stones on it.”

“Different stones? Do you remember what they were?”

“I wrote it down.”

From left to right: ruby, iolite, that mystery minty stone, amethyst, rose quartz, and diamond. I was glad I'd thought to jot it down on my phone right after I left the shop.

Tanimoto thought for a moment before getting up, saying she'd be back in a moment. A few minutes later, she returned. Apparently, cell reception was pretty bad where we were sitting. She had a page from an antique shop pulled up on her phone.

"Seigi, are you familiar with acrostic rings? They're rings with hidden messages, like 'dearest' or 'regard.'"

"You mean like wedding rings with the couple's initials engraved in them?"

"Not quite. Look at this one. See how it has a bunch of different stones in a row?"

Tanimoto moved to the seat next to me and propped her phone up against a glass. The picture on the screen was of a ring with colorful stones set in a circle. It looked like a seven-petaled flower—each of a different color—that had just bloomed.

"This one says 'dearest.' If you look at them going clockwise, it's diamond, emerald, amethyst, ruby, another emerald, sapphire, and turquoise. And the first letters of each spell out 'dearest.'"

"Huh? Wait, hold on. I don't understand."

I was confused and Tanimoto nodded, "Oh, right. You take the first letter of each stone's name and put them together. D from diamond, E from emerald, A from amethyst, R from ruby, another E from the other emerald, S from sapphire, and T from turquoise gets you 'dearest.' It's the sort of thing you'd give your soul mate. I guess you'd call it poesy jewelry? It's a pretty expensive hobby, but the description of this ring says it's an English antique, so it must have been a gift from an aristocrat or something."

So you could spell words with the first letters of the stones' names. It felt like the fog that had been hanging over my head suddenly cleared up. An English aristocrat, huh? Well, I knew one of those. Namely a certain jeweler who was too kind for his own good and happened to tell me about how issues

surrounding his family's inheritance destroyed some of his relationships.

"The ring I was shown might be one of those, too."

"Well, it has six stones and starts with ruby and ends with diamond, right? Maybe it's a regard ring? Regard as in 'to hold someone in the highest regard,' meaning to love or adore someone. That's six letters, and it's still pretty popular in this style of jewelry. Can I see your notes again?"

I promptly handed her my phone. Was this the mystery Saul wanted me to solve? Was this the real question I was supposed to be researching? I felt my body starting to burn up. How could I possibly ever thank her?

"Oh, wait, Seigi, sorry I'm wrong."

"Huh?"

I didn't understand what she meant, and Tanimoto pointed at the word "iolite" in my notes.

"The stone after ruby is iolite, not emerald, right? Iolite starts with an I not an E, so it's not 'regard.'"

"Maybe I got the stone wrong..."

"Don't you dare say that. You saw them in person, so you know better than anyone. Have more confidence in yourself. Trust your eyes, Seigi."

Now that I think about it, Saul had praised me for knowing what iolite was when I gave that answer. He wouldn't have said that if I was wrong, right? Then again, what if he was being sarcastic because I was way off the mark, and I just hadn't picked up on it? No. Iolite was a blue stone. If I *had* made a mistake there, it'd be sapphire, not emerald. I needed to calm down and think.

But the person who made that assessment wasn't the accomplished jeweler, Richard. It was me.

I had no confidence in my assessment. None whatsoever.

"...Lemme write it out and see."

I pulled a receipt from my wallet and borrowed a pen from the café counter. I decided to assume the ring *was* an acrostic piece of jewelry. If the second stone

was actually emerald somehow and not iolite, what would it look like? R, E, mystery stone, A, R, D—it'd be a perfect fit for a regard ring. That'd mean the mystery stone started with G. Garnet was basically the only option there. I'd never seen a garnet that color before, though.

What if the second stone was sapphire instead? R, S, mystery stone, A, R, D. That didn't really sound like an English word. Maybe it was a Sri Lankan word? I hoped it wasn't, because I was never gonna figure it out if it was. Richard would have no trouble with that, but I was way out of my depth in that department.

"...I still have no idea."

"Then maybe you were right and it really was iolite."

"But doesn't the second letter have to be E?"

"Well, we don't know for sure if the word it's spelling is 'regard.'"

"....."

If my eyes weren't wrong then.

R, I, mystery stone, A—oh.

I felt a jolt of electricity shoot down my spine.

"Hrm, I don't really have any ideas either, but—Seigi? What's wrong?"

My hand started to shake. I knew what it was. *I solved it. I solved the mystery.*

"Tanimoto, can you help me find a mineral reference book? One with an alphabetical index...I'm in kind of a hurry."

"Sure thing. We can look for one together. Don't worry—if they don't have one in the library here, we can go to the National Diet Library. And if they don't have one, we can go to the science museum."

"Yeah!"

The two of us got up together, and the shop owner shot us a satisfied glance. When we each paid for our drinks, he made a comment about how nice it must be to be young. What did it mean to be young, anyway? I remembered hearing an old song on the radio the other day that said it was all about "being lost." Was I lost?

But the thing about being young is, sometimes, even after you've been lost for a long while, you do find your way out.

Saturday. I'd never had such a busy week in my life. It was already after 1 p.m. by the time I scrambled to Jewelry Étranger. The short-statured jeweler greeted me once again when I rang the shop's bell. Mr. Saul Ranasinghe Ali, dark-skinned gentleman, Richard's mentor.

He flashed me his best smile without a shred of fondness in his face.

"Ayubowa! Hi, Seigi Nakata again. That means 'hello,' right?"

"Āyubūvan. I see you've been learning Sinhala. Is that where you're planning to go next?"

"No, nothing like that."

It wasn't that deep. I just felt like I'd taken the fact that we were speaking Japanese for granted, so I wanted to at least learn to say "hello" to return the favor.

The shop was so sparkling clean that I almost didn't recognize it, and tea had already been prepared. It was the same spiced tea he'd made last time, the one that almost made my body feel on fire. But when I took a sip, it seemed a little more mellow this time. Maybe he'd tweaked it to better fit his Japanese customers' taste. Saul was using one of the cups we had for customers, but he served me tea in one of the two gold-rimmed cups. He must have seen right through my gesture at the cabinet last time.

While I was drinking my tea, Saul took the ring out of his pocket. It was like he'd been waiting for this moment. The ring with six stones in it. With a mystery mint-green stone in the middle and an old gold band.

"Do you understand the meaning of what I asked you now?"

"I'm pretty sure I do."

"Very well," Saul said, listening intently. *Wait, I still have something to say first.*

"I have one request. Please give me three chances. I want the right to make

two mistakes. I am a complete amateur, after all.”

For the first time, Saul looked shocked at something I’d said. Like, how dare I ask for a lifeline before the challenge even starts? But I wasn’t backing down. Richard’s mentor stared at me, but I didn’t falter. After a tense moment, he let out a little snort.

“Fine. Let’s compromise. I’ll give you two chances, not three. Is that acceptable?”

“...All right. Thank you very much.”

“Now, if you don’t mind,” he said with a smile.

It’s answer time. Okay. Let’s do this.

“It’s chrysoberyl. Mint-colored vanadium chrysoberyl.”

Saul slowly raised an eyebrow and examined my face. What was he, the host of a quiz show? After a terrifying five-second pause, he opened his mouth.

“Incorrect. Try again.”

I held back a frown. This was my last chance. But I was confident. I had this.

“Chrysocolla. Specifically, silica with chrysocolla inclusions, also known as gem silica.”

A second or two passed—long enough to say a prayer—before Saul smiled his unsettling smile and leaned forward a bit to say, almost in a whisper, “Congratulations. That is correct.”

Yes, yes! I did it! I’d never be able to thank Tanimoto enough. Letting myself get carried away, I stood from my chair and pumped my fists in victory. Saul put the ring back in his pocket, almost like he thought I posed some kind of danger to it. I quietly sat back down.

“Judging from your answer, I take it you reached an answer to the other mystery as well.”

I nodded. I was sure of what Saul had meant now.

“If I were to give that ring a name, I’d call it a ‘Richard ring.’”

“Indeed. Good lord, when you didn’t pick up on it immediately, I wasn’t sure

what I was going to do.”

I found both chrysoberyl and chrysocolla by looking through mineral reference texts. Both started with CH. Acrostic jewelry typically only used the first letter, but I thought there was a chance two might count sometimes, and the more I thought about it, the more I thought I might be right.

Ruby, iolite, chrysocolla, amethyst, rose quartz, diamond—R, I, CH, A, R, D. Richard.

“Did that ring belong to him?”

“I really don’t know. He told me he’d inherited it, but that’s the extent of my knowledge. He had me restore it, and I’d planned to return it to him here, but it seems we just missed each other.”

Saul raised an eyebrow. It didn’t seem like he was keeping tabs on what Richard was doing. He might have even been in the same position as me: being led around by the nose by Richard. He did look exhausted as he sipped at the last of his tea.

“...And this is why I always find myself cleaning up after my idiot pupil. Who has the audacity to ask someone to protect another person who they just abandoned? Must not feel much obligation to take care of them, after all.”

“Wait, protect someone? What are you talking about?”

“*Richard asked me to protect you.*”

“Protect me? Protect me from what?”

“Everything.”

Nothing made sense. As I sat there, a deranged look on my face, Saul explained that I would surely find out soon enough. It didn’t sound like he intended to explain any further.

“Now, I still have some time before I need to leave at two o’clock. I can’t claim to know much, but I’ll tell you what I know. If Richard were here, he’d probably strangle me for doing so, but luckily for us, he isn’t. What would you like to know?”

“Um, e-everything, please.”

“There isn’t enough time for that.”

“Then, um...where did you meet Richard?”

“Oh, that’s where you’re starting, huh?”

Saul smirked and took a sip of his tea before he began.

Saul had met Richard in Ratnapura in Sri Lanka—the town Richard’s grandmother was from and the town where *my* grandmother’s padparadscha sapphire was mined. It was a pretty negative first impression, with Saul thinking Richard was just some good-for-nothing white guy buying up gems from the local mines and selling them at a markup to tourists. I guess that would make him a colleague of that con artist Sasaki, in a way. But when he inquired about his circumstances, he discovered that Richard had fled his home country of England for some unspecified reason and was firm about not wanting to return.

“...So he ran away?”

“Precisely. This was nearly four years ago, now.”

Saul had already been selling jewelry for a while at that point. While lecturing Richard—who already had a gemology certification—he sensed he was a diamond in the rough, with the potential to shine given a little polish. He took him on as a nominal student, providing him with food and board, and began a little jewelry training camp of sorts. Richard gained experience with a wide variety of stones outside a classroom setting and became Saul’s right-hand man, helping him expand his business. His first shop was in Colombo in Sri Lanka, the second was in Hong Kong, and the third was this very shop in Ginza.

“So you just picked up some guy whose background you didn’t even know and took him in?”

“Honestly, I’m shocked I did that, myself. I did tell him he shouldn’t follow my example in that regard, but what does he go and do?”

Saul looked me in the eye for a moment before smiling. Oh, that’s what he meant. I guess considering the circumstances under which I met Richard, it wasn’t all that different.

“At first, I didn’t think he was much more than a crook invading my territory. I

politely asked him to leave, but he had a real eye for gems and a certain spark about him that really struck a chord with me. I might compare how he was back then to a star sapphire with a 50/50 chance of selling—a stone with numerous flaws, but a perfect star shape and decent color. The sort of thing that could easily become a masterpiece with the right finish, worth the time spent on it. While he wasn't as fluent as I was, he could speak Japanese, so we ended up using it as something of a secret language at times."

He was comparing him to a gemstone, too. Saul opened his arms wide, saying that ultimately, his judgment hadn't led him astray. The raw chunk of mineral he found had bloomed into a marvelous gem. I wanted to hear more about their time together, but I had other questions to focus on at the moment.

"...Let me ask you another question. This is the most important one."

"Let me guess: 'Where is Richard right now?'"

I nodded, and Saul shook his head, a mix of pity and amusement on his face.

"Unfortunately for you, I haven't the faintest idea. Poor thing, you put all that work into researching the name of that stone believing wholeheartedly that I knew where he was, didn't you? Sadly, all I have to offer is my condolences."

"Don't worry, I have some idea, at least."

"Oh, well, that's a weight off my shoulders."

"I do have something else to ask you though—could you tell me about Richard's father's side of the family?"

"You mean the Claremont family, headed by the Earl of Claremont?"

I nodded. The name almost sounded fake. For some reason, I'd felt disheartened when I looked up the name and found out it was real. They were one of the prominent families that owned land in London's business district and earned massive sums of money through their real estate investments—not too dissimilar from Ginza landlords. I'd also discovered that the current earl was something of an Americanophile and was currently working in finance in the US. They were real-deal nobility—a family that existed long before the overuse of the term in the 19th century. They hardly felt real. It was a struggle to connect that to the flesh-and-blood Richard in my mind.

“It seemed like he was kind of estranged from his family.”

“Not ‘kind of’—to the best of my knowledge, he was. He hated his father’s name to the point of preferring mine. It was quite brave of him.”

Saul’s tone didn’t suggest any irony. It suddenly occurred to me that Saul might know more about the person whom Richard had been seeing in the past but ended up breaking it off with, due to various complications. But I decided not to ask about the estrangement. I had other more pressing questions.

“Another question: Quite recently, an Indian-Italian man by the name of Singh tried to pick a fight with Richard. He said Richard was the ‘Lord Claremont’ he had met at Ranasinghe’s shop.”

“If nothing else, none of my customers ever called him ‘Lord Claremont.’ However, I do have an idea as to who you’re referring to. In fact, there’s really only one explanation. Someone unrelated to my business probably planted ideas in that man’s head and sent him here.”

“Put ideas in his head? Wh—who would do that?”

“Perhaps the person who knows how to get on Richard’s nerves better than anyone else in the world.”

What? Like an archnemesis or something? That’s a thing? I pressed Saul on it, asking exactly what he meant, and he just shrugged. He had the same look on his face as before—the ‘you’ll find out soon enough’ look. I felt like he was dodging that one.

“...Is he really in that much trouble right now?”

“I’d like to know the answer to that myself.”

“What’s his home like?”

“As I said, I’m quite curious about that myself.”

“Um, were you really working together for multiple years?”

“Are you asking if I was with him 24/7? He’s talented enough at what he does to achieve 80 percent of what I can on his own. In our line of work, having too many jewelers in one place means they end up fighting over the already-tiny customer pool. Obviously, it’d be more fruitful to do business in different

areas.”

It sounded like they had a pretty formal relationship, despite Richard being his student for many years. But maybe that was just it. Maybe Richard stuck with him all this time *because* he treated him that way. He didn’t seem to like people who were clingy and stuck their noses in his business. He’d probably have disappeared in no time if he found someone irritating. Just like he did with this place...

Until pretty recently, that thought would have made me depressed. But it didn’t now, because I knew he had to have a reason for leaving like that. I was sure of it. Someone as kind as him wouldn’t vanish into thin air with such weird parting words. I was sure of that, too. I was sure of all this, but I still couldn’t accept the situation. So I had decided to chase after him until I could tell him that. Even if it meant spending almost all the money I’d earned working at Étranger, the money I’d been intending to use to pay Hiromi back for my tuition.

I found myself beginning to feel motivated again. Saul smiled, as if he’d noticed something. The lines on his face were much deeper than Richard’s, so his brown face filled with darker wrinkles when he smiled.

“Mr. Nakata, I have a question for you, if I may.”

“...Go right ahead.”

“Do you have anything to say regarding what I brought up the last time you were here? Regarding your *feelings* for Richard.”

I flinched a bit, and Saul flashed that unsettling smile of his again. I guess suddenly tossing bombs at people was a signature move of both teacher and pupil. Fine. It wasn’t like I hadn’t given it a lot of thought, anyway.

“I do have something to say about it.”

“Oh?”

“...You were trying to suggest that even if I ‘appreciated’ Richard from the outside, I might not be able to deal with his more troublesome qualities up close. That if I was merely attracted to his shadow—just delirious with passion—I’d just cause trouble for him, and it would be best for both of us for me not

to see him again.”

Saul smiled warmly. It was a familiar smile. It was the same smile Richard would give before dropping one of his pearls of wisdom. Even though the two of them looked nothing alike, their softer sides were really quite similar. I guess Richard must’ve learned it from him.

“Seems like you gave the assignment some real thought. You’re not completely hopeless. So, what’s your side of things? You think you have what it takes to deal with his more complicated side?”

I nodded.

Love can blind us—that seemed to be the message of the French book Tanimoto read. I guess that was what crystallization is about. Basically, the same thing Saul was trying to tell me. But the question wasn’t really whether or not this was romantic love or not but the simple issue of how much of him I was prepared to accept.

Some gems were cut to be viewed head-on. A customer who loved such a gemstone had no need to look at it from below. They could very easily just view it from its most beautiful angle. But if they wanted to know more—to become more intimate with the stone—they had to be prepared to view it from every angle. I wanted to do that. After all, the person I was talking about wasn’t a stone. He may be as beautiful as any gem, but he was unmistakably a flesh-and-blood human being, just like myself.

“I’m prepared for it. I’ve decided to go after him.”

Gemstones can guide people toward their true desires. Richard had said something like that more times than I could count during our time at *Étranger*. He must’ve really, really believed it. You might say gems were like mirrors, reflecting one’s heart’s desire.

Richard, the living gemstone, had changed me. While I hadn’t really spent all that much time here with him, I couldn’t think of anyone in my life, other than my family, who’d had such a big impact on me. I wasn’t about to just let him abandon me like that.

“I’m sure he has his own reasons, but I have my own, too. I don’t expect you

to understand, but...I can't just leave things like this. He's the one who told me I should just go where I want and do the things I want, after all."

"And just what is it that you want to do? What will you do once you find him?"

"I just want to say my piece. I'll probably start by telling him how angry he's made me."

Saul let out a deep sigh when I said that, but he still had a smile on his face. "You certainly are brimming with youthful energy. It seems a bit too deep for fleeting romantic passion, but far too intense for mere friendship, too."

"Then let's just call it plain love. I love him," I asserted decisively, and Saul's lips began to curl as he stared at me. His smile cut across his face from ear to ear, like some kind of general of hell's legions.

"Bravo. I wish I could have recorded that performance to send to that imbecile."

"You misunderstand me! I'm not talking about romantic love! I love my own mother, after all! That's how I mean it!"

"Yes, enough already. You've done very well for such a shy Japanese fellow."

He must have sides of himself he didn't want to show to anyone else, and things he didn't want to tell anyone. I could understand that. For the past six months, our relationship at the shop had been stunted by the two of us practicing the "beautiful" Japanese art of "being considerate." We were boss and employee, English and Japanese. There was a wall that existed between us, all in the name of being considerate. But I'd had quite enough of that.

Richard was the one who, to borrow a turn of phrase from Sasaki, had kicked that wall to the curb. He'd done so when he made the phone call that made me feel like my heart might break. So I had no obligation to keep holding back forever. I didn't care if he gave me a disgusted look or disparaged me. If he told me to go home, I'd go home, although I'd probably try to go see him again.

I didn't care how much he hated me. He'd treated me with so much kindness that I could never bring myself to hate him. I'd go to the ends of the Earth to help him if he needed me. In fact, even if he *didn't* need me, and told me that

my butting into his business was the most trouble anyone had ever caused him, I wouldn't care. It was his fault for not telling me what was going on.

Saul stared at me for a bit before clapping me on the shoulder and giving me a good squeeze.

"The thing about us humans is that we cannot take more than we give. That's simply the way we're made. If you have received a great deal from Richard, then my idiot pupil will simply have to accept just as much from you. That is the way of things, Mr. Nakata."

"Oh, no, I'm just some nobody part-timer."

"For four years, he and I were mentor and student. What of you and Richard? How would you describe your relationship?"

"Me? I met Richard this spring. I was just a college student who happened to be passing by, and Richard was just a foreigner being harassed on the street at night. Things had worked out, so he ended up hiring me, and I became a part-time tea server, and he became my boss. That hadn't changed until he disappeared."

But now I wanted to get closer to him.

Saul checked the clock on the wall. He'd said we needed to wrap up by two—we only had fifteen minutes left. The mustachioed mentor smiled, as if criticizing me for panicking.

"Don't worry about the time. I'm planning to visit an old friend who won't mind if I'm a bit late, as long as I call ahead. It's been ages since I was last in Japan, so perhaps it's no wonder things are so different. I have so very many people I must visit as well."

An old friend. That sounded so cool. I hoped Richard would call me "an old friend" like that someday. That would be a dream come true...though the way things stood right now, it would never be anything but a dream. Maybe someday. But if I ever wanted it to happen, the first step was reuniting with him.

"I hope I can see him... I feel like I might just die if I can't see him again. I mean, not literally, but..."

“You will see him again. Or, perhaps I should say, you won’t be able to avoid it,” Saul said sort of offhandedly to me as I sat there, shocked. I hurriedly tried to collect his teacup as he set it down—that was my job. But Richard’s mentor held fast to the other side of the saucer, preventing me from taking it. His black eyes stared up at me. “Out of curiosity, do you already happen to know where Richard went?”

I looked a little startled by the question, but my reaction seemed to confirm something to Saul. I was confused.

“Wait...did that strange con man show up here, too?”

“Con man? If you mean that ill-mannered creature, I politely asked him to leave.”

“That’s the guy. He approached me, too.”

“He’s nothing more than a plaything—a puppet. Be wary of the person behind the curtain, holding the strings. I should have known as much, considering you didn’t ask a single question about his whereabouts.”

Saul groaned under his breath that he was a step behind. The person behind the curtain? That’s right—when I’d asked Sasaki how he got such a perfectly timed shot, he said something weird about being tipped off. He hadn’t given me any details, but who was his source?

Saul surrendered his cup to me, straightened himself out, and declared in a soft tone, “Someone already has their eyes on you—watching you intently and with great interest, almost like someone might observe a very delicate piece of raw euclase.”

Someone was watching me? Not Richard, but *me*? But why? To what end? I looked confused, and Saul said something even more perplexing.

“I’ll leave you with this: That beautiful gemstone was raised in a den of vipers. If I were to describe the small favor he asked of me, it would be to keep you far away from that vipers’ den. But quite frankly, I feel no obligation to heed the requests of my ever-troublesome idiot pupil. You ought to go where you wish to and do as you wish. Just be on your guard. This world holds gems that can steal your heart with a single glance but also lethal venoms that can wound your

heart with a single bite.”

“S-sorry, could you explain that again, but as though I’m really bad at Japanese?”

“You want to see Richard, don’t you? You want to see him so badly, you might not think twice about sacrificing whatever it takes for the opportunity to do so. Which means all that’s left is for you to go. You needn’t worry about whether you’ll be able to see him. *They* will find you, and they’ll bring you to him. But in the end, you won’t be able to avoid your reunion with him.”

Every phrase he uttered weighed heavily on my mind. I won’t be able to avoid it? And who were “they”?

“I take it this is another one of those things that I’ll just understand when I get there, huh?”

“Exactly.”

“Got it. Well, I guess I’ll have to go and find out for myself.”

“Haha! Good answer. If I were ten years younger, I might have considered taking you on as a pupil in Richard’s place. I’m quite fond of young folks who seem like they have potential.”

“Huh? Oh, I mean, it’s not like I’m planning on becoming a jeweler. My dream is to become a civil servant.”

“Even with your eye? Contribute to this country’s future, then. Make there be more Japanese folks looking to buy gems than sell them off! However—”

However what? His eyes looked different from before. Those dark orbs were terrifyingly sharp, looking at me intently.

“However, both your dreams for the future and your relationship with Richard—whatever they may be—are only just beginning. Make sure you get home safe. A good jeweler needs the nerve to read the room and make good decisions under pressure. Sound judgment is life or death in this world.”

The way he was talking kind of reminded me of Grandma. That was how she’d lived her life—like every choice was life or death. She told me so many times that doing bad things would always catch up to you, all the while choosing to

continue to walk a dark path.

I nodded deeply, and Saul sighed.

“Good grief, I wasn’t trying to put such a grim look on your face. Oh, that reminds me, I am curious about one thing. You asked for three chances to guess the identity of that stone—what was your third guess going to be? I can’t think of any similarly colored stones that start with CH. Chrysoprase perhaps?”

“Oh, uh...actually, I only had two guesses to begin with.”

Saul reacted like he thought he misunderstood my Japanese. I shook my head. He hadn’t misunderstood me.

“I mean, you’re Richard’s mentor, right? So I tried to imagine how Richard might test me if we’d only just met. If I couldn’t do it in one guess and asked for him to give me two chances, I know he’d scold me and tell me to narrow it down to one. So, I decided to ask for three to give me room to compromise on one and still use both options I’d come up with.”

Saul went quiet for a moment before he burst out laughing, roaring so hard that it was almost scary. Was he going to be okay? Had I really hit the bullseye of what constituted as his sense of humor? The mustachioed jeweler laughed so hard, he had tears in his eyes. He apologized, wiping his eyes with a handkerchief.

“I see. My mistake. You are much shrewder than Richard was when I met him. Seems my worries about having the nerve to make decisive judgments when it counts were misplaced.”

“I, uh, sorry...”

“You have nothing to apologize for. The virtue you should be proud of is your intelligence, not your humility. Treasure it. It’s the talisman of truth that will keep you safe.”

I bowed my head to him and took our two teacups to the sink to wash them. For some reason, I felt at ease. How many times had I stood at this sink, doing the exact same thing? I felt like the moment I stepped out of the kitchen, Richard would be there.

I left the shop as Saul closed up. After he locked the front door, he offered me his hand again to shake.

“Good luck, Mr. Nakata.”

“Seigi is fine. That’s what Richard always called me.”

“Oh, I knew that. But a certain idiot asked me to use your surname as long as I could manage to.”

Richard did? But why?

Saul smiled slightly when he saw the confusion on my face.

“You want to know his reason? As he put it, ‘He’ll get attached if you call him by his first name.’”

I’d get attached if he called me by my first name?

I was at a loss for words. I’d get attached? What did Richard think I was? A dog that started following him around because he fed me once? I chuckled a bit.

“...He really is an idiot, huh?”

“I would encourage you to tell him that yourself, Mr. Nakata.”

“You bet I will.”

We exchanged another hearty handshake, and I bowed at the bottom of the stairs as we parted.

Saul was headed toward Shimbashi Station. I went down into Ginza Metro Station, retrieved my luggage from the coin locker I’d stashed it in, and took the Marunouchi line to Tokyo Station. My passport was already in my breast pocket. It would be my first time on a plane since my high-school class trip to Singapore.

I had a one-way ticket to London Heathrow. I hadn’t arranged for my return flight yet, not knowing how long I’d be there. I asked Shimomura from my prep class to take notes for me, since I might be out of class for a while due to extenuating circumstances. I spoke to my professors and submitted as many assignments as I could in advance, and I had an attendance record of over 60

percent, so I was pretty sure I wouldn't get a failing grade on that account for taking a slightly early winter vacation. That said, I was honestly impressed I'd made it to the offices of so many professors in the economics department in a single week. A bunch of people kept asking me if I'd gotten suckered into attending some kind of religious cult camp, but I just lied and said I was going overseas to visit a sick relative. It wasn't *that* far from the truth.

Now I was wishing I'd put more effort into studying English. I was just going to have to see how far gestures and willpower would get me.

I donned my backpack and got on the Narita Express from Tokyo Station. I slipped my hand into my bag and secretly pulled out a little box while I sat on the train. It was the box Richard had given me, with my grandma's ring inside. The padparadscha sapphire ring. I wouldn't be able to sleep at night if I left it back in my apartment.

If you have the time to pray to some supernatural being to protect you, you're better off spending that time thinking of a way to protect *yourself*, Grandma might have said. But I was starting to feel like I was searching the Sahara for a single fleck of gold and might need some supernatural help.

Please let me see Richard again. Preferably without encountering whoever this "somebody" who's been watching me. I prayed for the sake of it.

The Narita Express ran swiftly along its silver rails toward the airport.

Case 2:

The Secret of Alexandrite

I'M SURE THIS COMES as no surprise to some people, but the prices of airline tickets apparently change depending on the day of your departure, the season, and all sorts of stuff. Leaving on the weekend, for example, is more expensive than leaving on a weekday. It depends on the airline, too, and direct flights aren't always the cheapest. I knew I had to be prepared to burn through all the money I'd earned working at *Étranger*, but the only flight with any seats available for the next two weeks was the most expensive Saturday departure. The flight would leave Narita at 7 p.m. with a midnight connection in Ho Chi Minh City—which meant I had to change airplanes to get to London—and then I could sleep all the way to England. It would get there at 8 a.m. The magic of time zones made it look like the trip only took half a day, but in reality it would be over twenty hours of travel.

There would have been several cheaper flights if I could have waited, but I was afraid I'd succumb to despair again if I waited any longer, putting all Tanimoto's hard work helping me get my thoughts in order to waste. Idle hands are the devil's workshop, as they say. I had to keep myself occupied.

I spent the seven-hour flight from Narita to Ho Chi Minh City feeling anxious because I didn't have a lot of time to make the next flight. I had to hurry to find the transfer counter, eventually getting there by relying on the English signage, but then something unexpected happened. The dark-skinned attendant smiled at me and said something, writing a new number on the boarding pass I got in Narita in pen.

What did that mean? He had a very strong accent, so I couldn't understand what he was saying. Crap. He was smiling, so it couldn't be anything bad, but beyond that, I was at a total loss. By the fourth time I'd apologized and asked him if he could repeat himself, I could hear the turban-clad man standing behind me loudly clearing his throat. Then someone slipped up beside me.

"Umm, he said that a seat opened up in business class and you've been

upgraded. How lucky! It's a long flight to England, best to take it easy."

"Oh! Thank you so mu—?"

"Oh, it was no trouble at all."

The person smiling at me wasn't Japanese at all. He was a tall, blond-haired, blue-eyed foreigner. His Japanese sounded a little childish, but he must have been in his early thirties—a little older than Richard, I'd guess. He was wearing a grey V-neck sweater. He told me, "See you later," as he left. Wait, later? I didn't have time to think about the implications of that, though.

I looked for my gate based on the numbers on my boarding pass and only stepped up to the boarding gate after confirming multiple times that it was, in fact, the flight to London Heathrow. I had to wonder—were upgrades like this really a thing? I didn't think the website I'd used to book my flight had said anything about that.

I entered the plane, still half in disbelief, but the seat on my ticket was without a doubt in business class. There didn't seem to be any additional fees. Compared to the economy seats, these were much bigger and had a lot more usable space per passenger. Even the rows were wider. I was bewildered, unable to help thinking there had to be some mistake.

"....."

The seat next to me was empty. Maybe another economy passenger was going to get an upgrade? That would put me a bit more at ease.

Boarding ended while I was worrying about the situation. I hurried to put my bag away and fasten my seat belt, but the plane's door still didn't close. One of the passengers must have been late. Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed. We were getting close to takeoff when the man in the grey V-neck sweater came running to the door, apologizing in English. The moment he got onto the plane, the door closed.

He was a little winded, but he sat down in the seat right next to me without a moment's hesitation.

"I barely made it! Man, I'm sorry for making you wait. I got stuck on the phone."

The smiling man was, without a doubt, the same one from earlier. While I was still processing what happened, he set his boarding pass and passport down on the little table between our seats and fastened his seat belt like he'd done it a hundred times before. The plane started moving almost immediately, and his passport tumbled off the table.

"Whoa."

I reached out and caught it before it hit the floor. He smiled and thanked me. And in that moment, a strange sensation ran down my spine. The way his lips looked when he smiled, they just—I knew I was being crazy but—they kind of reminded me of a certain somebody.

The man smiled even more broadly as I sat there, confused. He took the passport from my hand and flipped it open to show me. His nationality was listed as United Kingdom—so he was British—along with his photo, passport number, and name: Jeffrey Claremont.

Claremont.

"Hello, Seigi Nakata. As you may have guessed, I am related to Richard. I hope this'll be a fun trip for the both of us!"

He put his passport away in his breast pocket and took my hand. A weak handshake. I didn't have the wherewithal to squeeze back.

The plane gained speed down the runway, and we were in the air before I knew what was happening. The force pushed my back into the seat. It was a thirteen-and-a-half-hour flight, and I had nowhere to escape.

The man sitting next to me had a large rectangular, faceted gemstone on his lapel. It glimmered the same color as the emergency exit sign.

"I'm Richard's cousin. Richard's father is my father's younger brother. We were basically brothers when we were younger, and learned Japanese from our tutor together. Admittedly, he continued his Japanese language studies at Cambridge, so I'm sure he's much better at it than me now. By the way, would you like something to drink? Champagne for a toast, maybe?"

Jeffrey Claremont continued talking. “He was always smart, ever since he was a kid, you know? And he was always so calm and logical, but he could get really sentimental about the weirdest things. Like when the dog we had as kids, Taro, died. Oh, I have pictures I can show you later! I remember thinking he seemed so cold, like he was the only one unaffected by it...but then I caught him alone in his room, gnawing on a pillow and bawling his eyes out. He was only like ten, too. It was kinda cute how he tried so hard to keep up the act. Oh yeah, what are you having for dinner? There are meat, fish, ethnic, and vegetarian options. Are you a Buddhist?”

“It’s unfortunate that there aren’t a lot of newer movies on this flight. Airlines have been struggling financially lately. I’m English, but my dad and older brother run an investment firm over in America, and it sounds like doing business has gotten a lot more complicated in recent years. Oh, you’re gonna watch TV after all?”

“Lights out?! Already?! Well, don’t worry, you can just push this button and voilà! You have a light. We can keep talking. But we have to keep it down, as other passengers are sleeping.”

“Are you dating anyone? Look, this is my girlfriend. She’s in Boston. Want me to introduce you to someone who can speak Japanese? Ahaha, the look on your face just now. I’m kidding!”

Jeffrey Claremont had a very different conversational style from Richard. His words seemed to drip with a kind of social lubricant that was calculated to get his conversation partner to respond. While listening to him, I found myself lulled into a sense of security that almost made me start talking. But there was something about the way he talked that also reminded me of a news anchor one-sidedly delivering information. He didn’t really give me much opportunity to get a word in. What was he even trying to say to me?

All the lights in the plane’s interior were off, except for the reading lights at our seats. The roar of the engine resounded unchangingly through the cabin. I couldn’t hear any other conversations around us, even when I strained to listen. All amidst the engine noise, passengers slept soundly with eye masks on or wore headphones to watch their tiny TVs. I wanted to sleep, too. I’d kept going at an unreasonable pace that day because I was expecting to be able to sleep

on the plane. If I didn't get some sleep, my body would be demanding I pay it what I owed when I got to England, which would be a problem.

But despite all that, I couldn't ignore Jeffrey's attempts at conversation.

"All right, now that everything's settled down in here, why don't we get to the point?"

The point? What would that be exactly? I had a lot I wanted to ask him, but there was one thing in particular that had been bothering me.

"Um, Mr. Claremont, I—"

"Oh, please, call me Jeff. Mind if I just call you Seigi from now on?"

"Sorry, I'm deathly shy, so I'd kinda prefer we didn't act so familiar. Anyway, so..."

I asked him what he was doing on this flight.

Jeffrey seemed a little taken aback by how direct the question was. Then he smiled, an unsettling look on his face.

"Did you really need to go out of your way to ask that? Well, I'm on my way home from a meeting I had with a client who lives in Vietnam yesterday. Sure, you can conduct meetings online, but one-on-one and in person is the best way to deepen friendships, don't you agree? Satisfied with that?"

"Is it fair to assume you're following me?"

"I guess. I mean, can you really blame me for being curious? I was really surprised to find out someone was coming after my dear little brother."

"Didn't you say you were his cousin?"

"Yes, but I feel more like his older brother."

I was reminded of what Saul had said to me. I didn't think Jeffrey was one of the "vipers" he'd warned me about, but I wasn't convinced he was an angel. But this did confirm one thing: Richard had deliberately cut contact with his family. Which meant he must not have wanted to see Jeffrey either. I'd had a feeling I might be seeing someone from his family, but I never expected them to come to me. He had to have gotten information about me from somewhere.

Jeffrey must have sensed I was anxious, because he smiled at me like someone trying to comfort a small animal.

“Oh, loosen up. You’re worried about letting something slip that you shouldn’t, right? I’m not sure there’s anything I can say to convince you to relax, but I’ll have you know I’ve had my eye on you and Richard for a while now. It was that incident with the emeralds that caught my attention. Richard got pulled in by the police several times, remember? You see, that wasn’t just because he was a material witness—they started prying because the name on his passport didn’t match the one on his business card. They even called the family. They ultimately let him off once they realized he was an upstanding citizen, but thanks to that little brouhaha, I found his trail. I really owe the Japanese police a big thank-you.”

“Then how did you know I would be on this plane...”

“Well, I am from the land of Harry Potter—I just used magic. Specifically the magic of reading your browser history. Using the machines on campus might be convenient, but I’d strongly recommend you buy yourself a computer of your own. Anyone with a picture of you could follow you in, poke around your browser history after you left, and report it all back to a certain somebody in a different location. I have to say, booking this flight was a disaster. You can search by ‘lowest price’ all you like, but this close to the wire, it’s going to be rough. Oh, and just to be clear, nothing I did was illegal, and I don’t intend you any harm.”

A chill ran down my spine, like something slimy and scaly was dragging itself down my back. I was actually a little cold. I rubbed my arms a bit, and Jeffrey asked me if I was okay in a cheery voice. What was with this guy? Admittedly, I found my phone screen a little too cramped to research flights, given how tiny the takeoff and landing times looked in the search results. I did all my research at the computer lab and even used the lab printers to print my tickets. It wouldn’t have been very hard to snoop on any of that, but still... What was he trying to accomplish by telling me all this?

Jeffrey’s sparkling smile wasn’t budging, even under my gaze.

“Now before we get into what I’m doing here, I have a few things I need you

to hear, Mr. Nakata. About the inheritance mess Richard is embroiled in, and about our family. Would that be acceptable to you? Or would you like to go to the restroom first? It will be a rather long story.”

“I’m fine. Please go ahead.”

“Oh, don’t hold it on my account. It really wouldn’t be funny if you developed deep vein thrombosis, especially in business class. You should always remember to drink lots of water and move your legs around every so often on long flights. Did Richard never tell you that? He was born to travel.”

“I told you, I’m fine,” I insisted. Jeffrey nodded, finally relenting, and leaned toward me a bit. Then, for some reason, he stroked the gem on his lapel. Was it some sort of superstition?

“The tale I’m about to tell you is that of the Claremont family, gemstones, and hatred.”

The Claremont family was in its ninth generation, and a fairly old family, as far as the English aristocracy went. The source of the inheritance troubles that Richard was embroiled in was the seventh Earl of Claremont. The old man had lived about a hundred years ago—which would make him something like Richard and Jeffrey’s great-grandfather?

When Jeffrey saw my brow furrow, he pulled a tablet out of his bag and drew a diagram with the stylus. He drew a big black star at the top of the vertically oriented screen and wrote a 7 next to it. I guess that represented the seventh Earl of Claremont.

“He was born at the end of the nineteenth century, and he was a tyrannical bigot full of prejudice and hate. His one and only hobby was collecting gemstones as an investment. As soon as his son came of age, he left England and married a white woman living in Sri Lanka in the blink of an eye. I mean, I’m sure you’d want to get out of there ASAP if you had that man for a father. He refused to join the military because he didn’t want to kill anyone. This would have been the early Showa era in Japan—the smell of gunpowder was in the air.”

He drew a long line down from the star and added a black circle at the end of it. I guess it was going to be a family tree.

Sri Lanka was still a British colony at the time, so as far as the earl was concerned, his only son and heir had done something completely unthinkable by marrying a woman from that area. The children of noble families steeped in tradition didn't marry non-English folk—it was unacceptable. Not that any of that made any sense to me.

Furious, the earl disinherited his son and stripped him of his right to the family title, declaring unilaterally that another family member would be inheriting it. If I were the son, I'd probably have sent him a letter that just said, "Thank you very much." I guess being disinherited cost him quite a lot of money, but from an emotional perspective, it had to be a huge weight off his shoulders. Jeffrey suggested as much himself. However—

"This was when the winds suddenly shifted—and the Second World War began. No one thought it would really happen, but even England joined the war. And then the Blitz. Are you familiar with it? It was a major bombing campaign against London. The city was heavily bombed early in the war, and over forty thousand civilians lost their lives. Tragically, the Claremont family was nearly wiped out! Every family member with a potential claim to the title was attending a party at a friend's place. When an air raid started right as the party began, many of the guests didn't believe bombs could possibly be dropped on an affluent neighborhood."

The earl himself, who showed up to the party alone and late, managed to narrowly avoid being directly hit by the bomb that flattened the building. But he was seriously wounded in a traffic accident amid the confusion afterward, leaving him on the brink of death. Figuring they were out of options, someone close to the earl relayed this information to his son in Sri Lanka, begging him to return to England. You see, there was a problem with the title—if a member of the peerage were to die without an heir to inherit the title, their lands and property would be rendered forfeit to the crown. *I guess the nobility has it rough, too.*

The earl, on his deathbed, went pale with shock when he saw his son's face. "'What are you doing here?!' he shouted at him. Sounds like something out of a gothic horror story, huh?"

Those ended up being his dying words. And thus the earl's only son made his

triumphant return to his homeland, his family in tow, and inherited the title.

Jeffrey wrote an 8 next to the black circle.

The war came to an end while all this was going on. The new earl's wife, Leah, who had come over from Sri Lanka, was growing frustrated with the ins and outs of her newfound status. Apparently, she much preferred to hide out in their manor estate with her husband and watch the wild birds.

The new earl and Leah were Jeffrey and Richard's grandparents. The two of them had three sons. Jeffrey drew three lines down from the black circle, drawing three more like it at their ends.

"First, there's the eldest son—my father. The ninth earl and head of the Claremont family. He's still alive. His wife is an American. I'm not their only child—I have an older brother named Henry. Their second son, my uncle, is living a leisurely bachelor's life in Italy. And their third son is Richard's father. He's an entomologist."

He drew two lines from the left-hand circle and added a circle to the end of each—probably Henry and Jeffrey. He left the middle circle as it was and added one line with a circle at its end to the right-hand circle—Richard.

"Richard's mother is a dizzyingly gorgeous French woman, but his father only had eyes for butterflies, so they ended up divorced before long. After that, Richard came to visit more frequently. Neither of his parents were particularly interested in childrearing to begin with, so my parents essentially ended up raising Richard. That's why I call myself his older brother. Oh, that's right! I forgot about the pictures!"

Jeffrey put the family tree away for a moment and opened up his photo reel. He pulled up a photo of two blond children, around the age of ten, laying on the grass, hugging a collie dog with big smiles on their faces. He pointed out which of the kids was him and which was Richard. Standing behind the two of them, off to the side, was a taller boy wearing a collared jacket. He looked about five years older. I figured he must be Henry, Jeffrey's older brother. There was something shiny on his chest—some kind of medal or brooch, maybe?

With each flick of his finger, the boys in the photos grew older. Their children's clothes turned into school uniforms. And soon the blazers turned into

graduation gowns. The adorable little boy was gradually becoming the beautiful man that I knew. Jeffrey and Richard looked more like siblings than Jeffrey and Henry did. Jeffrey, getting a bit carried away, regaled me with story after story about the family—how Richard always excelled at everything, how Henry was always so serious but loved to play the piano, the taste of their mother's American home cooking, the estate where they grew up surrounded by the beauty of nature, their strict private tutor.

He smiled and suggested we take a break when he hit the end of his camera roll. I nodded, and he got up from his seat, excusing himself to use the restroom.

I let out a sigh. I had a mountain of things to think about, like Jeffrey's intentions and the inheritance issue. But the most pressing issue at hand wasn't either of those things. As pathetic as it sounded, I was so, so unbearably tired. I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer.

My mind was clear, but my body was exhausted, begging me to let it rest. I felt like I was fighting an internal battle with myself, but I couldn't do anything about it. I was so tired that it felt like I'd been drugged. And my head was so stuffed to the brim with information that it felt like I was at a noodle speed-eating competition, being handed a second helping before I'd even taken my first bite. I decided to take a little nap, just to try to get my head on straight before Jeffrey came back.

I closed my eyes. In an instant, my mind slipped off into another world. The drone of the plane's engines got farther and farther away as darkness enveloped my body. I felt like I was flying. It must've been ice-cold outside the plane.

I wondered if Richard had taken this very flight when he went back to England.

As I nodded off, I suddenly found myself back in my apartment in Takadanobaba. My bed felt much more cramped than usual. The room was gloomy, and there was an awful noise outside, like some kind of road construction. And Richard was there, at my bedside. The first thing I wanted to do was apologize for looking at photos of him as a kid without him. But neither

my mouth nor my body would move. Then Richard leaned over me. His mouth was moving, but I couldn't make out what he was trying to say. I didn't understand, but his face was getting closer to mine. I tried pulling away, like I always did, but he really was close this time. And he kept coming closer. So close. And I couldn't wake myself up. *He's so close. At this rate he'll. His lips will* —

“Ngh?!”

I woke up gasping, startling the man next to me. He rubbed my back to comfort me. I guess I really must have scared him.

“Are you okay? What happened?”

“...Sorry. I had this...recurring dream about Richard again. It kind of startled me...”

“A dream about Richard? What kind of dream?”

“...He's there, in my room, and it seems like he's about to kiss me...but then I wake up...”

“Oh, I see.”

“I'm fine. I've gotten used to it...sorry...”

“You should drink some water. There's a complimentary bottle at your seat.”

I was pretty sure I kept having the same dream over and over because I was exhausted. Of course, part of me wanted to blame Richard for the dreams because he'd gone and disappeared, but I'm pretty confident he'd be creeped out if I started getting mad at him for the contents of my dreams. There's no way I'm ever telling him about it.

I didn't even realize what a bizarre thing I'd said until I'd drank my water. I was inside an airplane. I'd been in Vietnam not too long ago, and now I was on my way to the UK.

Jeffrey watched me from his seat with a cheerful smile on his face.

“Wanna sleep? Or do you mind if I continue talking?”

“...Please, continue.”

Jeffrey smiled, delighted. The smile was obviously fake. Based on what he'd told me so far, I still had no clue about what the dispute was or why Richard was so deeply embroiled in it.

Jeffrey pulled his tablet out again and opened up the family tree he'd drawn.

"Now we're in the twenty-first century, when the seventh earl dying in abject despair has been all but forgotten. It all started eight years ago, when Richard was twenty. The vast fortune the Claremont accumulated over generations is managed by a family distantly related to them—we call them the trustees. The head of that family passed away from illness at the age of 93. He was the last living person to have had direct contact with the seventh earl, so when he passed, the earl's hidden will and fortune were unsealed."

"Hidden will and fortune?"

"All the assets that were not inherited by anyone were put in a single safe and plans put in place to disclose its contents upon the death of the trustee, whom the seventh earl trusted a great deal. What do you think was inside?"

What was inside? My back was damp with nervous sweat. The fatigue was catching up to me. I begged my body and my mind to concentrate, to hang in there a little longer. I had so much I needed to think about. What did he say when he started this story again? That it was a tale of something and hatred surrounding the family. Oh, right.

"...Gemstones?"

"Bingo! You sure are sharp for someone who just woke up. Yes, gemstones. The real star of the show was a massive diamond. How many carats, you ask? Well, let me tell you: one hundred and sixty-two. It was a masterpiece, the kind you'd almost never even get to see in a museum. And how much was it worth? Well, let me tell you that, too: Its current market value is three hundred *million* pounds. You could start three massive companies with that and still have money left over."

Sparks flew in the recesses of my sleep-addled brain. Three hundred million pounds—how much was that? If one pound was about 200 yen, I could make a guess. No, wait—it was a little less than that when I was at the currency exchange, closer to 150. So, 300 million times 150. Forty-five *billion* yen?

What would anyone even do with that much money? Anything, I guess. Even those massive lottery jackpots looked like a joke in comparison.

“Well, that wasn’t very fair of him, was it? It was obviously a major part of the estate’s assets. The convention of having the eldest son inherit the entire family fortune, preventing estates from being split up, is why the British aristocracy still survives in some form to this day. It really wasn’t the earl’s call to make.”

“.....”

“I think you’ve already figured out that the person set to inherit that fortune was Richard.”

“But why him?”

“Would you like to read the will?”

Jeffrey opened a different program on his tablet and put in a password, opening up another folder of photos. It was full of photos of worn-looking documents—naturally, all written in Latin letters and words I didn’t know. I couldn’t read them at all.

Jeffrey chuckled a bit when he saw me go quiet with an awkward frown on my face. “You really can’t read them, huh? Not even a little? After all that time with Richard? That’s hard to believe.”

“...English was never my strong suit.”

“That language maniac sure went easy on you. I’ll explain. This is a list of potential heirs. It has some criteria regarding their mothers’ lineage.”

At the top of the page, it said, “Outline of Requirements to Inherit the Assets of the Seventh Earl of Claremont.” The top section had a list of potential candidates. Jeffrey pointed to the lines “direct male descendant of the Lord Claremont,” and “progeny of the current Earl of Claremont and any of his siblings at the time of this will’s unsealing,” translating them into Japanese for me. That last one essentially meant Richard’s generation—which should have included Jeffrey and Henry, too. The eldest son normally inherited, so why was Richard there but not them?

Jeffrey read me the next part as I sat there with a confused look on my face.

“If the mother is English, if she’s Scandinavian, if she’s from Central Europe, if she’s from Southern Europe, if she’s from the Baltic states’...”

What was this?

“So, you see, the further your mother was born from England, the further down the line you are for the inheritance, because England is supposedly the most noble country. Richard’s mother is from France, and ours is from America—and America is farther away! So that’s why they picked Richard.”

“...That’s just awful.”

“I know, right?”

How terrible. It was awful that an inheritance could be forced on people for reasons they had no control over. It seemed less like a will than a sinister curse. Was even death not enough to quell the fury of the xenophobic seventh Earl of Claremont?

“The funny thing about this will is that it doesn’t allow anyone to give up their place in the line of succession. If Richard turns down the inheritance, that diamond will automatically be donated to an environmental conservation charity—the National Trust. It wouldn’t go to me. It wouldn’t go to my brother or father. We would all kiss that three hundred million pounds goodbye! The same thing would happen if Richard didn’t meet the other criteria, but in that situation, he’d get the sapphires as a consolation prize. The sapphire collection’s value, by the way, is in the tens of thousands of pounds according to the receipts of purchase. That’s more like three round-trip business class tickets between England and Japan.”

“...And did Richard turn it down?”

“Of course not. But he hasn’t accepted it yet either. There’s no way out of it. For Richard to inherit the earl’s secret fortune—be it the diamond or the sapphire—he has to fulfill one more requirement.”

“There’s more?”

“And how!”

Jeffrey’s finger slid across the screen. The next document was all text, text,

text, but this one was more itemized. I was pretty sure almost every line ended with something about the National Trust. That was the charity that came up earlier, I guess. What was this about?

“Can you get anything from this one? This bit says the heir will inherit when he gets married. And his choice of partner will determine exactly what he inherits. For example, here it says, ‘If the heir marries a woman whose mother or father are within three degrees of relation to someone born in India or the surrounding region, the heir will inherit the sapphire.’ In this case, the diamond would go to the National Trust. ‘The same applies if the heir marries a woman from the Boer states or the continent known as Africa.’ The diamond would go to the National Trust. In summary, it’s a list of qualifications that would bar Richard from marrying someone if he wants to inherit. The list essentially disqualifies about 90 percent of the world’s population.”

“.....”

“Are you okay? You don’t look well.”

I felt like there was a rock lodged in my throat.

Essentially, this was all about the old man being angry that his son married a foreigner. I could kind of understand that. A lot of people in Japan didn’t look fondly on international marriages until recently, and I was sure it was still a pretty common sentiment. But the crazy thing wasn’t just how angry he got but the fact that he directed that anger at even his great-grandchildren. What was he even hoping to accomplish? What, like, “purify” his family’s “defiled” blood or something?

It sounded like the kind of joke someone might come up with after going on a week-long bender. But it also wasn’t the sort of thing someone would do unless they really believed it.

“Is that real?”

“Let me put it this way: Why would I want to deliberately invent such an embarrassing lie about my family?”

“Isn’t there some way to void it? Like, that’s gotta be a human rights violation or count as discrimination or something, right? Can’t you just tear it up?”

“Destruction of official documents is a crime. But there’s also a stipulation in the will that the diamond would go to the National Trust in that case. It’s not like we hadn’t considered that. While it’s clearly discriminatory and ethically questionable by today’s standards, it was pretty questionable even when he was still alive. We thought a lawyer could find some way out of it, but that didn’t work out. It seems he had a lawyer draft the list of prohibited partners at the time, and whoever it was was smart enough not to phrase it as ‘no non-whites.’ All it says is that if the heir marries a certain type of person, he’ll inherit the sapphire. That way, it could be argued that it was just based on the deceased’s preferences, not racial discrimination. We tried to argue that it wasn’t legally binding, but that also failed. It’s an iron-clad wall of bigotry.”

“So, ultimately, for Richard to inherit the diamond...”

“It would only happen if he ‘married a woman of conventional English ancestry.’”

Ah.

Richard had mentioned having to end a relationship with someone over the inheritance, but I finally understood—this was why. Maybe it was also his “personal reason” for wanting to avoid being alone with a woman in the shop. But none of it made any sense to me—not the contents of the will or why Jeffrey was telling me all this.

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“Why don’t we trade questions? I’ll tell you if you answer my questions. What made you decide to go to London to pursue Richard?”

Because that con man Sasaki showed me that picture, and I figured out he was going to London. But I mean, that was the how, not really the why. Why was I going after Richard? Because I couldn’t leave things the way they were. Because I was mad, and I couldn’t accept the situation, I decided to go and give him a piece of my mind. I didn’t think Jeffrey would understand any of that though.

“...It’s hard to explain.”

“Hm, I guess that counts as an answer. Next, do you know why Richard

vanished?”

I didn't. He could have fled because someone was after him, or he could have left for entirely different reasons. Jeffrey seemed to intuit the answer from my face.

“I'll tell you: He left because my dad asked him to come home. You see, he moved some money out of his British bank account recently. About thirty-five thousand pounds worth—enough to buy a car. There's no reason to be raising eyebrows at what he does with his money, of course, but Richard pulling money from that account had to mean something. I mean, he hadn't touched that money for four years.”

Jeffrey's father, the current Earl of Claremont, thought of Richard like a son. Richard had essentially disappeared four years prior, so when he made that withdrawal, Jeffrey's father somehow went through the bank to ask Richard to come see him. I didn't even know you could do that. But I guess if you're some incredible mega-client, even a major bank could be your errand boy.

“He feels indebted to my dad—and he's getting up there, almost seventy. So he couldn't exactly say no to him. Richard's such a kind person, after all. Do you have any idea what he spent that money on?”

There was something forced about the tone of his voice. Thirty-five thousand pounds. At the 150-yen-rate, that was about five million yen, which allowed me to venture a guess. It was probably the portion of the jade hand's auction price that he covered. He was acting weird back then. I'd thought it was because of that Singh guy showing up, but I think it started even earlier.

“I don't think that's it.”

“Huh?”

“I'm pretty sure he was already planning on leaving, even before that.”

“Oh, aren't we sharp. What makes you think that? Let me hear your reasoning.”

“First, I have a question for you. Do you know a man named Singh Ganapati Bertuccio?”

“Oh.” Jeffrey nodded. He made the same face Richard usually did when he told me “bravo,” but his smile was quickly replaced by an indifferent expression. “Unfortunately, I don’t. But I do recall hearing about an antiques dealer from Southeast Asia making a fuss in England—he was going around telling people that a jeweler with a face like a movie star had ruined his business. It was a real bother. I may have given him a little information to get him to leave.”

“And what about a Japanese man by the name of Yoshitsuna Sasaki?”

“I’ve never heard that name either. But I do know the man I sent to show you that photo of Richard. And then you got mad and immediately booked a flight.”

“Why do you go out of your way to say you haven’t heard of them?”

“I do have an image to maintain.”

I still didn’t know him very well, but at least we were talking. So, the Indian-Italian man who tried to pick a fight with Richard at the auction was working under the auspices of Richard’s very own cousin. But it didn’t make sense for Jeffrey to send that guy to try to get Richard to do something. If he was trying to track Richard down, sending someone like that would just get his guard up. It seemed clear to me that Singh was just trying to get his own petty revenge.

Richard must have sensed something deeper brewing behind Singh showing up, left the shop to his mentor, and disappeared. He was probably concerned about causing his clients trouble.

And probably me, too.

“Any other questions?”

Jeffrey smiled. It seemed like he really was open to me asking any questions. In which case...

“...About that stone.”

I pointed at the stone on his lapel. Richard’s cousin raised a shapely eyebrow. It was a rectangular cushion-cut gem. It was red, but I was sure it wasn’t a ruby. There weren’t really rubies that big or clear, and you didn’t find rubies or sapphires in cuts like that. All the ones I’d ever seen were round cuts.

“Were you given that stone as a present?”

“This? ...Yeah, it was a present. What does that matter?”

I knew it.

Well, I was pretty sure I’d figured out one thing I was curious about. A heavy feeling suddenly fell over me. I’d never wanted to be told such an awful story.

Jeffrey smiled at me again when he noticed how quiet I was.

“I take it you’re all out of questions. I want you to think about it a little harder. Even if Richard remains single until he dies, the diamond would still go to the environmental charity. And I would have a problem with that. Three hundred million pounds is an absolute fortune. It should be passed to the heir as part of the estate. It’s not something that should go to an individual. The best solution for everyone would be for him to just marry some random person, inherit the diamond, and return it to the estate.”

“Are you saying he should just marry someone he doesn’t love?”

“This isn’t the nineteenth century. People get married, divorced, and remarried all the time. He should just find someone who fits the criteria, get married, and divorce after he gets the diamond. Then he can marry whoever the hell he wants, or stick to the bachelor life if that’s his thing. It’s simple enough for even a child to understand these days. But he’s so stubborn.”

“Maybe he just has a very good reason to feel that way.”

“Probably. I couldn’t begin to understand, though.”

Jeffrey’s tone remained light the whole time. He was smiling, but not on the inside. I was tired of listening and talking, too. But just as I thought we were done, he asked me one more question.

“I just want to know one thing: How serious are you two?”

“...What?”

“You know, there’ve been lawsuits about this in England—‘woman sues boyfriend for telling her he loves her but never proposing after living together for two years.’ I just wanted to advise you to give up on that idea, if that’s why you’re following him to England. Our lawyers are not to be trifled with. Oh, I am

aware that you weren't living together, though. Just to be clear."

"....."

I hadn't felt my stomach drop like that in a long time. I was so angry, my mind just shut down. My body was so tired and my mind so riled up that they refused to work together. I couldn't say a word for a while, but Jeffrey just sat there and waited for me to speak. I was pretty sure I had a terrifying expression on my face.

"...I think I know why you're here on this plane now. I won't be answering any more of your questions. I'm sorry if that's unfair of me. Do you mind if I sleep? I'm exhausted."

"Be my guest. Would you like a sleeping pill?"

I said, "No, thank you," and started reclining my seat. I was shocked to discover that holding the button down laid the seat flat like a bed. I'd probably be getting comfy about now if it weren't for the surrounding circumstances. If only the person sitting next to me had been Richard instead.

Richard. That stupid jerk. Did he vanish without saying anything to me because he thought I'd get angry and lose control after he told me? If that was why, he was right. I knew I needed to sleep—my limbs felt like wet noodles and my mind was an empty void, but my heart wouldn't calm, even when I closed my eyes. I wanted to sleep so badly, but I kept imagining his smiling face in *Étranger* and wanted to cry. I was so ready to yell at him when I saw him again.

This whole thing felt like someone dumping a load of bad luck, hatred, and misplaced anger on someone under the guise of a winning lottery ticket. If only everything Jeffrey had told me weren't true. But like he said, why would he need to go out of his way to make up such an elaborate and embarrassing lie?

It was no use. I wanted to sleep, but my mind wouldn't stop screaming at me.

If I had to find a silver lining in the situation, it would be about that "someone very special" he told me about in *Étranger*. That person he cared so deeply about but had to part ways with. I couldn't ascertain the person's gender from the way he spoke about them—not that I particularly cared either way, but I had been curious about it this whole time. Were they a man or a woman? But,

although I hated to say it was “thanks” to what Jeffrey had said, at least now I didn’t need to ask him any awkward questions on that front.

Ultimately, I ended up lying there without getting a wink of sleep until the cabin lights came back on, probably because it was time to get up. I felt like crap. Not because of some blood clot in my leg or whatever, but just from lack of sleep coming back to bite me. I really wanted an energy drink.

Jeffrey, on the other hand, was full of energy. He greeted me with a sunny smile. When I turned on the little TV at my seat, it showed a world map. I knew I was in a plane flying to Europe, but it hadn’t really felt real until that moment. The trip I took to Singapore in high school wasn’t all that dissimilar from one to Hokkaido or Okinawa, but this was totally different.

The last time I’d looked at the map, we were flying over the Indian Ocean. But now, Europe was right there. There were two hours left in the flight. The windows were still closed, though, so I couldn’t see outside.

I stumbled my way into the small bathroom and washed my face with lukewarm water from the sink. When I got back to my seat, Jeffrey had changed into a crisp button-up shirt and jacket. That gemstone sparkled on his lapel. He must’ve only just woken, too, so I thought he might have his guard down.

It might be my only chance to get the truth out of him.

“Good morning, Mr. Nakata. Did you sleep well?”

“...I slept all right.”

“Really? You have bags under your eyes.”

I rubbed my face, and Jeffrey brought his hand to his mouth and laughed.

“You’re just like Richard. He’s not a morning person either. He has a hard time getting out of bed in the morning on account of his low blood pressure. He used to fall asleep on the floor with a pillow in his arms or nod off in the bath all the time—it’s a wonder he never drowned. Surely you’ve seen it.”

“...No, I’ve never seen him like that.”

“Oh, you’re really missing out. He’s just so adorable when he’s nodding off.”

Jeffrey was as chatty as ever, like a talk show host monologuing at his audience. I had to find a way to get a word in edgewise with him. But how? I wasn't clever like Richard was. All I had in my arsenal were straight shots.

"Um...I know what I said before I went to sleep, but I still don't get it, actually."

"Get what?"

"What you want with me."

Why was he sitting next to me on this plane? I still wasn't sure. If I were in his position, I'd just look up my phone number and have an awkward conversation to try to get me to stay in Japan. That'd be way less work than getting the seat next to me on a plane. There had to be a reason he didn't take the obvious, easy route. What was he up to exactly?

"What do I 'want' with you? What a troubling thing to say. It's almost like you're accusing me of trying to do something to you. Well...are you familiar with the novel *Camille* by Dumas *fils*? It's a story about leaving someone because you love them. Isn't that one of your Japanese virtues? I think it's a good one, personally. Perhaps you could say that's what I 'want.' If you make the decision of your own free will, I'd be happy to compensate you handsomely for your sacrifice. How about a job at a brokerage firm after you graduate? Business is always good in the foreign lending sector."

"...Did you make the same offer to break up Richard's last relationship, too?"

Jeffrey went quiet for a moment. It seemed he hadn't thought I knew about that. I'd never expected to talk to someone like him either, to be honest... though I guess I now had another thing I needed to apologize to Richard for.

Jeffrey's composure seemed to flag for a moment before he stroked the gem on his lapel again and smiled.

"Wow, you knew about that. I'm impressed—he must really be serious about you. Richard's not one to flaunt his weaknesses, you know? He wants to look perfect, even if all he's ever done is run away from his problems. What do you even like about him? It's that face of his, isn't it?"

It didn't seem to have occurred to him that the four years Richard had spent

“running away” was really just “moving” and “having a career.” I mean, he left his home, found a mentor who took him on in Sri Lanka, and started a new life—and it was thanks to all that that I met him.

“I want to explain, but...I’m not very good with words... Sorry, I’m trying to think.”

“You don’t have to force yourself. You can explain all you like, but there are some things I’ll never understand.”

“But I want to. Because I want to get to know him better.”

“I think you’d be better off dropping the assumption that you can understand everyone—even him. It’s pure hubris. People don’t need a reason to love each other, just like they don’t really need a reason to hate each other. That’s what my great-grandfather’s will taught me. I’m sure you know what I’m talking about, too—how there’s some people you just instinctively know you’re not going to get along with. People like me.”

“No, I don’t think that about you at all,” I said, and Jeffrey shot me a derisive smirk. He must’ve thought I was just saying it to be polite, but he was wrong. Whether he understood that or not. “I mean, you care about Richard a lot, too, don’t you?”

The expression was wiped off Jeffrey’s face. It took a few seconds before a scornful sneer took its place—almost like his reactions were lagging. The expression reminded me of a child who’d been left out. It made him look a little younger.

“...Was that a leading question? I *used* to care about him. Key word: used to. He was like a little brother to me, after all. But not anymore. Now he’s just a man who’s causing me problems. I can’t stand the fact that the property that should rightfully belong to the estate is effectively frozen because of him. That’s the kind of money an investment fund could use to change a company’s reputation. As far as I’m concerned, not wanting to get married is just an excuse to run from a pragmatic business issue, and I’ll never let him live that down. But maybe you just can’t understand what it’s like to hate a member of your family.”

“Oh, trust me, I do. My father was a violent man. Back in elementary school, I

would have happily died if it meant I could kill him. But that's not the kind of hate you feel."

Jeffrey looked a little startled. If he wanted to talk about hating your family, I was pretty sure mine had just about every possible variation—my grandma, who hated herself for her crimes; Hiromi, who could never accept what grandma had done and let that dictate her life; my father, who beat her; and me, who despised him for it. I was also well aware of just how massive the gap between finding someone "troublesome" or "disliking" them and truly *hating* them could be.

"It takes an incredible amount of energy to really *hate* someone. I think you'd be better off steering clear of it. The only reason I still hate my father is that trying *not* to makes me so tired, I could drop dead... But that's not what you're feeling. You're not feeling anything close to that—you're just pretending to *hate* Richard. You wouldn't have enjoyed showing me those old family photos so much if you weren't."

"My, what a mouth. All right, if your pet theory is accurate, and I still feel the same fondness for Richard as I did when we were kids, do you really think I would have told the person he loved to go back to where they came from with no concern for Richard's happiness? Isn't that at odds with your little theory? Because it's wrong."

There were some inconsistencies, of course. But my brain could do a little better if I just got it in order. What would Richard say in this situation, I wondered? If Richard were here... If the man who could discover new light in the depths of beautiful gemstones were here, what would he do?

"People don't always say exactly what they feel. And they don't always act according to their feelings, either."

"This conversation seems like it's going to get complicated. I'm not sure my Japanese can keep up."

"That's right, you said you studied Japanese with Richard. Which means you must've talked to Richard the same way you're talking to me now...I think you must've been very close, if that's the case."

"You're making assumptions. It's only natural that we'd sound similar—we

learned from the same tutor after all.”

“You don’t sound anything like him, actually. He speaks Japanese much more carefully, with knife-like precision—it’s beautiful. He would always correct me right away if I said something weird, too. If I talked to him like you’ve been talking to me right now, he’d totally get mad at me, but he probably didn’t mind when it was coming from you—because it was you he was talking to, and because he was there with you, he probably—”

“Are you okay? You sound kind of delirious.”

“...Does your brother speak Japanese, too?”

Jeffrey went quiet for a moment before chuckling a bit and mumbling that his brother was five years his senior. When you’re a kid, five years is a huge gap. I was putting the pieces together, bit by bit.

“Sorry, one more thing, about your dog...you mentioned that Richard was crying *in his room*. And you also mentioned him falling asleep on the floor and in the bath.”

“And? What’s your point.”

“He let you take care of him.”

“Excuse me?” Jeffrey groaned. He had a faint smile on his lips, but it didn’t look fake. I felt like I was slowly uncovering the real him.

“Even I know that he’s not the kind of person who lets other people see his weaknesses. He always has his guard up. He must’ve let you see him like that.”

“This was ages ago.”

“I think he was probably even more preoccupied with putting on that front when he was a kid. If he had someone who would pretend not to see the aspects of himself he wanted to hide from everyone else, he would—”

“You’re just making ludicrous assumption after ludicrous assumption. Enough. This conversation is pointless.”

“Oh, I have a point—it’s that he really trusted you.”

“I said enough!”

Suddenly, a chime echoed through the cabin. The flight attendants walked toward the front of the plane, opening the windows one by one. I guess that meant it was morning. There was a sea of clouds outside the windows, but the sunlight was blinding. The little TV screen at my seat was showing the current time in England—it was a 7 a.m. sky.

A flight attendant said, “Excuse me,” with a smile, ignoring the tension hanging between us, and opened the window shade next to me before moving farther down the aisle.

The sunlight sparkled like a jewel in its own right. Jeffrey brought his hand to his brow, shielding his eyes.

“That stone is alexandrite, isn’t it?”

His eyes snapped immediately to the stone on his lapel. It was probably too close to his face for him to really get a good look at it, but I could see it clearly. The sinister red stone had changed colors in the light of the sun. Now it was a clear, refreshing green, like the undergrowth deep in an evergreen forest.

In the gem world, there’s this idea of the “Big Four.” It’s not a scientific category or anything, just a group of gems that are easy to use in jewelry: diamond, ruby, sapphire, and emerald. Richard told me once that if it was the “Big Five” instead, alexandrite would probably be the fifth. It’s beautiful, rare, and hard enough to wear well—all the major qualities required to be a good choice for jewelry.

Its strongest quality is the color-change effect. It changes color depending on the light. Assuming what the Dark Prince of Knowledge told me was correct, under incandescent lights—like the lights in the plane—it looked red or dark purple but turned blue-green under the light of the sun. The one I saw in *Étranger* changed from a dark purple to green. Stones that changed from red to green were more common in the past but very rare now. Even if he was rich, it wasn’t the sort of thing a thirty-something would just be wearing casually.

“Was that part of the earl’s jewelry collection, too?”

“You’re sharp. That it is. Want it? I’ll give it to you.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t... You shouldn’t even joke about that.”

“I’m serious, no need to hold back on my account. I already know what you are.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You tell me. I know—are you familiar with the story surrounding alexandrite?”

I shook my head, and Jeffrey started talking, like I’d finally handed the baton back to him. I could see a bit of Richard in him. Especially in the way that they both seemed more like they were off in their own little world when they’re talking than when they’re quiet.

“I’m sure you know that the name alexandrite is associated with a Russian Emperor of the same name. The stone was initially presented to Emperor Nicolas I around the time of his son and heir Alexander’s birthday celebration and thus was allegedly named for the prince. Unfortunately, misfortune befell the craftsman commissioned to cut the stone.”

Jeffrey drew his face a bit closer to mind, forcing the best smile he could with every muscle in his face.

“The emperor entrusted the stone to the craftsman in the morning. When he came to call upon him in the evening, he was quite astonished at what he found—the stone had changed! Of course, the stone had only just been discovered, so the emperor was unaware of its color-changing properties. He assumed that the craftsman had swapped the stones and had him executed that night. But after a good night’s sleep, when the emperor awoke and beheld the stone in the morning, he was shocked to find that the stone had returned to its original color. Recognizing the stone’s mysterious color changing properties and realizing his grave error, the emperor deeply regretted his actions and strove to govern his country as a wise and just ruler. Funny story, huh?”

More like an awful one. I told him as much, and Jeffrey’s smile deepened.

“That may be true if you’re viewing it from the craftsman’s perspective. Even a small child would have no trouble determining who was in the right in that story. But the craftsman was executed, and the emperor got to continue living his life without being denounced for his actions. At the end of the day, a person’s life is shaped by the angle from which they look at things—no, I should

say the angle from which they are looked *at*. Right and wrong are important concepts, obviously, but they don't determine outcomes. Do you have power or not? That's what really matters most. You must never let go of power. Nor must you allow those who threaten to steal the source of your power roam free. That's the philosophy I base my actions on. Those who criticize that stance on the basis of morality may as well be dogs barking at an ambulance—acting on mere instinct. But criticism is a small price to pay to maintain power. The thing that keeps families together isn't flowery words but the power granted by money. This stone is important to me because it taught me the importance of power."

Jeffrey gave me a bow when he finished his little speech. Power. Power like a Russian emperor. Enough power to crush the weak without anyone speaking up against you. A person like that could do anything they wanted.

If it took a beautiful stone to teach you something so mundane, you must've been in a position where you had to look at things that way. Jeffrey wasn't nearly as charismatic as he thought he was. If they were together and neither were talking, Richard would almost certainly outshine him.

"Why are you looking at me like that? Do you have something you want to say to me?"

"I hope you'll tell me if I'm off about this, but before the plane departed, was the person you were talking to on the phone your brother?"

Jeffrey's expression stiffened. Bullseye.

"Um...it's really hard to have to choose between two family members, huh? In my case, I was caught between my mother and my grandma. I really love my grandma, but...she and my mother never got along."

"You're not making any sense. What are you even talking about?"

"Sorry for jumping around. You're caught between your brother and Richard, right?"

Jeffrey pulled his lips taut. He brought his hand to the stone on his lapel for a moment before coming to his senses and pulling it away.

"Why... Why do you bring that up so suddenly? Did Richard tell you

something?”

“No, um, I didn’t even know you existed. But that alexandrite—”

“Huh?”

“In that photo you showed me with the dog, your brother Henry was wearing it. I had a feeling when I saw the green stone in the picture, but I wasn’t sure until the cabin windows were opened.”

His reaction was all the confirmation I needed. There was one last thing I wasn’t sure about weighing on my mind. If I was ever going to ask about it, this was my chance.

“Did your brother give that to you when Richard left England?”

Jeffrey told me to be quiet, but not in Japanese. With two English words.

I hadn’t realized I’d said something a simple apology couldn’t fix until after he said that. Why did I always end up doing this? Jeffrey’s eyes were tinged with the unmistakable hue of hatred. I was surprised he didn’t hit me.

But rather than raising a hand to me, Jeffrey reached for his lapel and plucked the now green stone off his jacket, clenching it tightly in his fist.

“...I’m sorry. I’m really sorry, okay?”

“You’re almost like a miniature version,” he said in a low murmur. The words were black tar, leaking from somewhere deep within him. It startled me.

Jeffrey stared at me for a few moments before an ambiguous smile appeared on his lips.

“...Yeah, being around you just reminds me of a certain someone. A certain someone who’s perfect—too perfect—too flawless for anyone else to live with. He’s smart and handsome, talented enough to never have to work too hard, never feels envious of others or holds a grudge, and is kind to both complete strangers and his cousins alike. People are supposed to help each other, right? But he’s too perfect to need any help from anyone. He can live all alone. I want you to take a moment to actually think about that—if a normal person had to live in his shadow, how do you think they would feel?”

I thought back to the photo of the three boys—Jeffrey, Richard, and Henry

way in the back. Henry couldn't speak Japanese with them. The "normal person" Jeffrey was talking about was probably...

"Have you ever had a family member develop a serious mental illness? That's a big social issue in Japan, isn't it? I hope they look at people like that with kinder eyes than they do in England. All of our relatives gave him the cold shoulder. 'Richard has it so much harder—why are you the one breaking down? Pathetic.' Even our own father."

He was saying the person who broke down under the stress of the secret will wasn't Richard, right at the center of it all—it was Henry, eldest son and heir of the current Earl of Claremont, who couldn't take it and was out of commission as a result. We were talking about a man in his thirties. I imagined it'd be something like if a young company executive suddenly got deeply depressed.

"The thing about Henry is that he's a lovable dolt. He wanted to become a stronger person and was willing to suffer more than anyone else to do that. If he'd been placed in that predicament—if he'd been the one tormented by this absurd darkness from the family's past—he would have been fine. But that's not what happened. The one 'suffering' was the beautiful and perfect and ever-so-kind Richard. Richard, who weathers both sunshine and stormy weather with the same ease. It was like everything my brother had been holding in all this time finally burst forth. He started saying things like, 'If only Richard had never existed,' and 'I'm worthless,' and 'Even if that diamond disappeared, I wouldn't be able to do anything.' He's proud like that."

I wanted to ask him why he didn't try to help Richard then, but the words caught in my throat. I couldn't. I wasn't there, and it didn't concern me directly. It wasn't my place to say something like that. Maybe Jeffrey could, but not me.

But even if I didn't voice the thought, Jeffrey seemed to know what I was thinking, his lips twisting into a callous frown.

"Why don't you actually use your brain for a minute? Richard could make allies of anyone in the world with a single smile. He's kind, smart, beautiful, and generous to boot. I mean, you like him, don't you? But my one and only brother isn't good enough. It's like he's completely worthless. He works his ass off, but he's ultimately just average. He's not great with people, either. He'd be all

alone if he didn't have me. That's why I sided with Henry." Jeffrey said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Everyone has low points in their lives, and Henry just so happened to be at one four years ago. That's all there really is to it. What do you think it does to a person to be at one of those points and have no one around to help them? To have everyone just look at them like they're worthless and pathetic? I don't even want to think about it."

"...Was there anyone else around who could help Richard?"

"Everyone in the family was sympathetic to his plight."

"Yeah, but sympathy isn't the same thing as being there for someone."

"If there was anything that could have been done, God, the law, my father, or I would have done so long ago. But there was no easy answer. And you're right, my brother gave me this stone. Just before Richard vanished, he gave me this precious stone he'd received from my father. But why did he do that? I didn't tell the person Richard was in love with to break up with him because I was hoping for a reward. I only did it because I didn't want Henry to die." Having said that, he tacked on, "Not that I'm complaining."

The plane, which had been flying through dazzling morning sunlight, slipped into a cloud. The cabin shook a bit and raindrops stuck to the small windows. Jeffrey dropped the hand he'd been using to shield his eyes from the sun and looked at me. He was still smiling.

"...I think anyone can survive on their own if they put their mind to it," I said. "Even if it means being deathly lonely, if you have a place to live and food to eat, you're not *really* going to die. But I don't want him to have to live like that."

Jeffrey went quiet. It was honestly kind of funny that he was the one who brought up maintaining an image, since everything he'd been saying this whole time was all for show. Had he given up? But on what? Returning to the way things were when they were kids? Had he abandoned Richard and sided with Henry because they could never go back to the time when the three of them were close? Or was he proactively responding to his brother's selfish desire for Richard to disappear? Even though the family refused to help.

That cursed will had probably broken more than Richard's relationship and Henry's heart.

“Listen, Mr. Nakata, I have something I’d like to ask you. If I were to give you this stone, would you turn right around and go back to Japan once we get to Heathrow and promise to never see Richard again?”

Jeffrey flashed a twisted smile. I didn’t want to see him make that kind of face. I didn’t want to see someone who vaguely resembled Richard smile like that. It made my heart ache.

“I kid, I kid. I know you’re familiar with jokes like that.”

“Look, I’m sorry for what I said earlier. Really.”

“It’s all water under the bridge. I didn’t want to say this, but I guess you really do love stealing other people’s things. You are the grandson of a legendary pickpocket after all.”

I was at a loss for words. Jeffrey fixed his usual phony smile back on his face.

My blood froze. I didn’t know how much he knew about my family. That didn’t really bother me. I was used to people investigating us, ever since I was little. I was even used to people saying I came from a family of criminals. But where did he get off saying I *liked* stealing other people’s things? Did he think my grandma picked pockets for *fun*? My grandma, the woman who told me hundreds of times that doing bad things always caught up with you? The woman who lived her life prepared for no one to ever forgive her for what she did until the day she died?

Calm down. I had to calm down. What would Richard do? What would he do if he were in this situation? He’d think about what the person he was dealing with wanted and what they were trying to do. So what did Jeffrey want?

Did he say that because I’d enraged him with a rude comment? I didn’t think that was it. At the very least, he was raised in the same environment as Richard. His mind had to work more like Richard’s than mine. Which meant everything he did had a purpose behind it. Was he trying to make me angry? But what was his angle?

I looked at Jeffrey again, searching for some kind of clue to help unravel the mystery. He still had the stone gripped firmly in his right hand, and it didn’t look like he was about to let go of it anytime soon. But why? Why do that when it

had turned such a beautiful shade of green?

Maybe...

Maybe he was trying to play the role of an alexandrite that doesn't change colors.

Maybe he didn't want to be playing the role of the man caught between his brother and his cousin for reasons beyond his control. Maybe he would rather simply be the selfish jerk. Maybe it was just easier to play the role of someone people hate. No—maybe he was trying to focus my hatred on himself, rather than someone else.

I relaxed my shoulders and let out a little sigh of relief, and Jeffrey rumped his brow.

"What's your problem? It's rude to stare, you know."

"No, I was just thinking that you really are Richard's older brother, huh? Every time I talked to him, I couldn't help but wonder how he didn't tire himself out, being so kind to other people."

Judging by the change in his expression, my response was probably the last thing he wanted to hear. He really had been hoping I'd react by getting mad at him. *Man, he really is bad at this sort of thing. If he really wanted me to hate him, he could have just abandoned me while I was struggling with the connecting flight.*

"I'm sorry for upsetting you. Really."

"...You two really are alike. Wanna know how? Both you and Richard think you're so much better than everyone else. And you don't know how to keep your noses out of other people's business either. I can't stand the way the both of you look at people like they're animals in a zoo on the other side of the glass."

I was pretty sure Jeffrey was racked with guilt. He could have done much worse if he really wanted to get in my way—things that might not be exactly legal but would be more efficient. But he didn't do that. He met me face-to-face and tried to get me to hate him, probably to protect someone else from having to be the villain because of a misunderstanding—like his brother Henry or even

Richard. Either way, it was clear that he wasn't behind all this.

"I know this isn't your fault."

"I see you're the type to make assumptions. Wow. I'm a little afraid of you now."

"Well...I can't deny that. Trust me, I knew I was doing something crazy when I got on this plane, not even sure if I'd ever see him."

The moment I said that, a satisfied smile filled Jeffrey's face. He seemed happier than I'd ever seen him. He was looking at me with an expression of pure joy. It was the same look you'd give a beloved pet when you're thinking, "Man, what a stupid little guy you are."

"Thank you, Mr. Nakata. You're a good kid."

"What changed?"

"Nothing, really. You just told me you have no appointments and aren't making plans for a wedding or anything like that. Wow, what a weight off my shoulders."

I let out a confused groan, and Jeffrey smiled cheerfully again. He looked satisfied. Extreeeemely satisfied.

"I was scared, you know. In England these days, you can have a relationship legally recognized in a way almost identical to a marriage without being required to give public notice in advance for people to raise objections. It's called a civil partnership. I don't know what I would have done if you and Richard were meeting up in Gretna Green, but it seems like you have no such plans, despite the lengths you've gone to. What a relief!"

"Gretna Green?"

"It's a place people go to elope."

He really wasn't making the most rational choices, after all. If Richard really did want to marry someone and he went through the procedures for a same-sex marriage in the UK, the diamond would end up going to the charity rather than the earl's estate. It would have been much smarter for Jeffrey to scare me off back in Japan than risk that.

But just like the stone that changed colors depending on the light it was exposed to, Jeffrey wavered. He said he was on Henry's side, but it was only natural to assume that he wanted to do right by Richard, too. Maybe that would have even been easier for him. But whether you were doing the hating or being hated, it was all just suffering in the end.

"At any rate, I'll stop with the old-fashioned jokes. I hope you can forgive me. Hopefully, the difference in an economy fare and a business-class fare will be enough to cover it, ha ha."

"...Do you think there's any way Richard can make up with everyone?"

"You really don't know when to quit, do you? You're free to judge me however you like. But I'm going to keep doing things my way." Jeffrey aggressively closed the window shade.

The large alexandrite sparkled a venomous red again, and Jeffrey donned a sparkling smile. I managed to recover some energy over my not-completely-defrosted breakfast, and then the cabin started to prepare for landing.

The announcement came over the speakers in English. I could hear the landing gear unfold from the belly of the plane. And after a light impact and being pushed back into my seat by the plane's deceleration, the plane came to a stop. Sparse applause went up throughout the cabin.

We had landed. I was in London in winter—a strange feeling. I was in Japan only yesterday, but now I was in a completely different world.

And for the first time, I remembered the number one most important thing I'd been neglecting to think about: What was I supposed to do next? How would I find Richard? And how was I going to free myself from his troublesome cousin who was set on playing the villain?

Case 3:

Follow the Lapis Lazuli

I ARRIVED AT HEATHROW at 8 a.m. and got out of customs around 9:30. It was after that that my own personal hell began.

It was a triple-layered hell, too.

“Oh, come on, Mr. Nakata, smile! Smile! Smile like you’re looking at your beloved off in the distance! Cheeeese!”

Big Ben, Westminster Abbey, Trafalgar Square.

Jeffrey grabbed me by the arm and dragged me around on a classic London sightseeing tour. I was planning to get away from him and escape, but every time I thought I’d lost him, he’d be stuck to me again like glue. I even tried slipping into a crowd and grabbing a taxi, but before the car left, Jeffrey was there to collect me with a smile on his face. I was struggling enough to communicate in an English-speaking country as it was—I’d be completely helpless against a malicious interpreter deliberately twisting my words. It made me wonder if Richard’s language skills were something of a self-defense mechanism.

This was the first layer of my hell.

“Oh, this is a good spot, too. Quintessential London. Let’s take another picture, Mr. Nakata.”

Jeffrey kept telling me to smile. I couldn’t smile, but he clicked the shutter anyway. That had to be the seventh or eighth selfie he’d taken with me since we got to London. He uploaded each and every one to social media and showed it to me. I guess he was kind of famous, because every time he posted another picture, he’d get responses—people asking who that person next to him was and stuff.

He didn’t respond to any of the comments, and it didn’t take long for people to start speculating about me. He was a handsome man, just like his cousin, and

he had this jovial rich boy thing going on, too. He probably had a lot of fans.

This was the second layer of my hell. I wished he'd just leave me alone.

Why was he even doing all this? I mean, it was obvious, wasn't it? He was trying to get in contact with Richard. I was just bait on a hook to try to catch a very particular fish.

"Are you all right, Mr. Nakata? You're not cold, are you? Are you just mad? Or are you hungry?"

"....."

Jeffrey seemed to think I wasn't responding to him because I was angry, but that wasn't it. My reasons were a bit more physiological than that. I know how pathetic this sounds, but it seemed I'd caught a cold for the first time in years. I really should have brought a change of clothes for the plane and a face mask.

At first, I thought it was just a bit of a sore throat. But then I started to feel like I was burning up, and it was taking all my energy to keep walking.

This was the third layer of my hell. If my body would cooperate just a little more, I could break into a sprint and get away from him. As it was, I couldn't go to the police—that'd just cause trouble for Richard, and I wasn't confident I'd be able to explain the situation to them. I guess it was just my fate to be dragged around by an overbearingly cheerful man while struggling to keep up with what was going on.

It only just occurred to me that I didn't even have a hotel for the night. I'd read online that you could go to a tourist information center and just believed it, assuming I could sort it out when I arrived, but if Jeffrey ended up dragging me around until the dead of night before abandoning me, I might end up sleeping in a subway station. My stamina was just about exhausted at that point. I had made sure to get traveler's insurance, but I didn't want to waste any more valuable time.

The next place Jeffrey directed the taxi was the most famous museum in England—the world-renowned British Museum. He smiled when he told me that it was free to enter.

"The museum has over eight million artifacts, which famously include the

Elgin Marbles and Rosetta Stone, but there are plenty of things I'm sure you and Richard would love. Look."

While we were in the line to get in, he plucked a pamphlet from the rack in the museum lobby and handed it to me, pointing at a room labeled with the number 47 in the lower right-hand part of the map. I guess this museum numbered all its rooms? I followed Jeffrey's uncompromising stride as we left the lobby, with its birdcage-like black lattice ceiling, and saw a sign that read, "World Gemstone Collection" in English. I could see an array of sparkling artifacts on display in a glass case.

"Incredible, right? It's a collection of rare jewelry made in the nineteenth century. The royal family's collection is in the back, too. Isn't it wonderful? You worked with Richard at a jewelry store, right? You must know what pieces like this are worth, then?"

Jeffrey's proud smile concealed a twinge of pity, like the way a mean-spirited teacher might look at a student with no chance of succeeding.

The stones Richard dealt in at *Étranger* were all destined for buyers. Some were to become mementos, others gifts for spouses or family members. Occasionally, people purchased them as financial investments. But fundamentally, they were things that existed between people. While the gems themselves might have no will of their own, I'd come to think of them as like pets, or spirits, or almost a sort of temporary tether between hearts.

But the jewelry on display in this exhibit was the polar opposite of the stuff we handled at *Étranger*.

Inside a fruit basket made of metal, pear-shaped baroque pearls were arranged like little fruits, nestled into gently curving golden leaves. A bird with wings of peridot and aquamarine was perched on the edge of the basket like it had just flown in from elsewhere. It had one leg up like it might fly off at any moment.

There was a necklace made of ten strands encrusted with cushion-cut diamonds and emeralds, with one conspicuously large sparkling emerald at the center. It must have been several tens—no, hundreds of carats. It was like the size of a chicken egg. Whichever princess wore that must have had sore

shoulders afterward.

A three-dimensional brooch shaped like a pansy had each of its delicately undulating petals set with amethyst and citrine, creating a gradient of color. But no matter how closely I looked at it, I couldn't tell how the gemstones were being held in place. It was almost like the stones were drawn to each other by a mysterious power, and they had always been meant to become a bejeweled flower. The engraved golden leaves had hundreds of tiny veins carved into them.

Setting their historical value and the fact that they were museum pieces aside for a moment, there wasn't a single piece of jewelry in the room that you could buy with even ten million yen. I'd learned what a ten-million-yen stone looked like at Richard's shop. The jewelry on display here seemed like monstrous artifacts that defied human understanding—requiring enough stones of that caliber to fit their designs and talented craftsmen pouring their souls into them to be born. I'm sure every piece of jewelry here had its own story to tell, but they weren't stories of individual trials and tribulations. They were tales of families—of countries. They were records of stories that unfolded on the massive scale of history.

And they continued into the next room.

England has an aristocracy, and aristocrats are supposed to be rich. I never had a very concrete sense of just *how* rich they were, but seeing the jewelry in this exhibit sure gave me one answer—they definitely weren't on the same level as a regular old landlord.

“Do you get it now? Three hundred million pounds would put you in this world.”

My head ached. It was just the cold I'd caught, not Jeffrey's cruel comment. He'd brought me here and showed me these beautiful, unfeeling gemstones just to remind me that Richard and I lived in different worlds? Seriously? He was English and I was Japanese. He was a multilingual jeweler and I was in college studying economics. Trust me, I was well aware that we lived in different worlds.

But, more importantly, we lived in the twenty-first century. Even if people did

live in different worlds, even if our nationalities, income, and races were completely different, you could still get on a plane and travel from Japan to England. Men could kiss each other and not be charged with a crime. *Oh no, I'm letting my fantasies bleed into reality again. If I meet Richard like this, he's going to hit me. Oh, but...*

I know it's a little late to be worrying about this, but was I really doing the right thing, coming here?

I'm nothing more than a nuisance right now.

Jeffrey looked around the room and ended up walking off into the next one all by himself. I tottered over to the bench in the middle of the room and took a seat before looking around the massive space again. I had to pull my eyes away from the ceiling when it started feeling like it might fall on me. That was when I noticed a little scrap of paper between the cushions.

“Huh?”

I thought it was just a piece of garbage, but I noticed it had some familiar text on it. It was a Japanese receipt. The subtotal was 920 yen. For chestnut cheesecake. It was dated a month ago. And it was from the shop...

...Ginza's Shiseido Parlor.

When Jeffrey came back to ask if something was wrong, I reflexively let go of the receipt and it fell to the floor. The back was blank. It had nothing written on it. I couldn't collect it while Jeffrey's suspicions were up, so I rose from the bench, feeling almost overwhelmed by sorrow.

My heart was pounding. What was a receipt from a shop I'd run errands at tens of times doing here? Did a Japanese tourist drop it? That didn't seem likely.

The room I was in, room 47, was in the lower right-hand corner of the massive, rectangular museum. It was on the other end of the museum from the north entrance. Rooms 46 and 45, along with the jewelry exhibit, continued to the east and culminated in a dead end.

I absentmindedly looked around the exhibits as I walked. I saw some Korean girls chatting cheerfully in one area. A group of blond elementary school children were taking notes, presumably on some kind of class trip. I saw some

Indian women wearing saris with gold accessories around their necks. But that was it.

Was he here?

Was Richard really here?

I was overthinking things. I was being crazy. Just deluding myself because I happened to stumble on something weird.

But just as that thought crossed my mind, I found another receipt that had fallen on the floor—no, it was left there.

It was for Senbikiya in Ginza. An eat-in receipt. The order was for a fruit sandwich and mineral water. *Mineral water*. Not tea, mineral water. I had to keep myself from smiling. But he *never, ever* drank anything but water when he was out.

I turned toward the wall to try to get my lips to behave. I couldn't let myself smile lest I rouse Jeffrey's suspicions. But this was proof. I was sure of it. I felt a little apologetic toward the museum staff for the litter, but I couldn't believe how much energy this one little scrap of paper had restored to me.

There was no doubt about it—he was here. The Emperor of Sweets himself.

"Look, the Royal Collection starts here. A dazzling collection from an age when no expense was spared to have the world's greatest artisans produce works of art. Mr. Nakata? Are you quite all right?"

"...I'm fine. I'm just a little tired."

I was fighting the urge to flee as I looked at the jewelry that was even more sparkly and ostentatious than the stuff from before. Richard was somewhere in this massive museum. But why? Did he see Jeffrey's posts on social media and decide to take the bait and surrender? That didn't sound like him. No, he was surely intending to grab the bait and run. He'd come to save me. I'd do the same if I were in his shoes.

I had to find him. And then we'd have to escape quickly. I couldn't let myself trip him up more than I already had. Just my being here was a huge inconvenience to him.

But what was I to do?

Maybe there was another receipt somewhere. Hopefully with a number or something written on the back—all the exhibits in this museum had numbers assigned to them. Once I knew where I needed to go, I could slip away, saying I needed to use the restroom, and then use that opportunity to—no, that wouldn't work. If Jeffrey found the note with a number on it before I did, it'd all be over. Maybe he wouldn't be able to read it if it was written in Japanese? That seemed unlikely, considering how well he could speak Japanese. Surely, he'd be able to read the kanji for numbers at the very least.

I had to consider that he might have seen the other receipts and pretended not to notice. If he was watching where I was going, I might end up completely humiliating myself, like bait walking itself right into the mouth of a predator.

I mean, was Richard even actually here? Could I be sure I wasn't dreaming?

It felt like someone was blowing a conch shell in my ear. It felt like I could see the line between dreams and reality in the glimmering of the jewelry collection. Was I in Tokyo right now? Or London? Where was Richard?

Suddenly, I heard a cell phone ring. I narrowly avoided smacking right into one of the display cases. It seemed like it was Jeffrey's phone. He answered it with a "hello" before making his way into an empty hallway, a very serious look on his face.

The unexpected call didn't sound like it was something minor, at least. He wouldn't have time to pay attention to me.

This was my chance, wasn't it?

I moved around the exhibit as quickly as my body would allow while Jeffrey was occupied. When I confirmed there were no other receipts there, I noticed a sign for the restrooms nearby. What if? I had to look everywhere I could.

In the men's handicapped-accessible bathroom, in the gap between the sink and the mirror, I found the receipt I'd been hoping to find. It was folded in half. I took it, praying as I opened it, and found a message this time.

"Have you come from beyond the sea as well? You will find your friend in the same place you might find me. Use your pamphlet for reference."

It was written in neat, round hiragana and kanji scribed in a masterful hand, despite claims of still having much to learn. Richard's handwriting. I pressed the receipt to my forehead and hid in one of the stalls, locking the door behind me.

What message was this little poem, I guess, trying to convey? I mean, I understood that he'd probably kept it vague for safety, but I wished he'd made it a *little* easier to understand. What was he going to do if I couldn't find him?

"Your friend?" Did he mean like one of the Japanese exhibits at the museum? Lemme see, where would that be? I flipped through the pamphlet. The Japanese artifacts were in rooms 92 through 94. On the fourth floor. Did he really want me to walk all the way up there? We'd be like rats in a trap—all the exits were on the first floor.

No, wait. I needed to use my brain. There were other clues.

Like what did "beyond the sea" mean?

Surely it wasn't just saying he came from overseas on a plane. Beyond the sea... I vaguely remembered that phrase coming up in *Étranger* before. I struggled to remember. My headache wasn't doing me any favors. Blue ocean. A blue gemstone. Sapphire. Blue topaz. Aquamarine. That's right, aquamarine was used as a protective charm by sailors. Marine means sea. Marine. That's right—there's a paint with "marine" in the name, I think. It's bright blue.

My mind felt fuzzy. I didn't really have much interest in fine arts. I felt dizzy. Yes, this was a message from Richard.

Something Richard would have had at *Étranger*.

I shoved the receipt in my pocket and opened the pamphlet again. Thankfully, the map included in the pamphlet indicated the locations of the most popular exhibits for tourists, along with little photos of them. Probably helped people get around without the staff having to be asked the same questions over and over again. But it really was a terrifyingly massive museum. Everything on the map was famous. But among the exhibits...

...I found it.

I'd found what I was looking for. This was it.

My head was pounding like a concert venue during a death metal band's encore, but that was probably just because of how worked up I was. I slowly opened the stall door. When I was sure no one was there, I went back out into the exhibit hall to look for Jeffrey. I couldn't find him. He must have still been on the phone. I prayed the call would be a long one.

I had to hurry. I had to at least get down the long hallway back to the exhibits on the north side of the museum. While I was hesitating, I took my jacket off and tucked it under my arm, hoping it might make me harder to identify from a distance. I could deal with being a little cold.

I remembered it now. When Richard had told me about an old stone back in Étranger.

A fragment of a starry night sky.

That's how people used to describe it in ancient times. Even I knew the name of the stone. People used to grind it into a powder to make cosmetics and paint. The famous painter Vermeer's signature blues came from the same stone.

The pigment called ultramarine.

I always thought it was kind of a lame name. I mean, "ultra"? Really? What was this, some kind of superhero movie? It made me laugh, like it was just called "super blue" or something, but Richard forced a smile and explained that that wasn't what it meant. *Ultra* originally meant "beyond," he told me. I guess the superheroes in those movies had gone "beyond" normal human capabilities.

I don't think I need to explain that *marine* means "sea" again. In other words, *ultramarine* means "from beyond the sea."

In the past, it was thought this stone only came from Afghanistan, so Europeans considered the blue as having come "from beyond the sea." Until synthetic ultramarine was developed, the stone was worth even more than its weight in gold.

After I'd covered most of the hall, I quickly looked back over my shoulder. I felt like I was playing a game of Red Light, Green Light. But there were just tourists behind me. I didn't see Jeffrey anywhere. I could keep going. I had to.

I took a left and walked into an exhibit with a completely different atmosphere.

I felt like a bobblehead doll as I continuously compared the hallway I was in to the map in the pamphlet, but I finally found my way to the room I was looking for. The sign on the wall read: “Ancient Mesopotamia.” In other words, the birthplace of civilization.

The secluded room was lined with glass cases displaying objects worn and used by ancient peoples. There was a necklace made of stone beads that looked rough and unfinished by today’s standards, but it had been worn by someone over four thousand years ago. I had to wonder how difficult it must’ve been to acquire enough stones to make it.

I looked around anxiously, checking my pamphlet, before I finally found the object I was looking for. It had a big glass case all to itself in the middle of the room—the exhibit’s main attraction.

It was a mass of intense blue. The sign read: “The Standard of Ur.”

A large wooden box, its whole surface was inlaid with lapis lazuli.

Human figures were depicted with sparkling rainbow shell fragments and red coral atop a brilliant blue mosaic background. People holding a banquet, people walking with goats, people carrying firewood on their backs, and so on. It was a 4,000-year-old work of art. I remembered learning in high school that we still didn’t know exactly what it was used for, but it was beautiful regardless. Not that this was really the time to get distracted by admiring it.

It was the only exhibit noted in the pamphlet that featured lapis lazuli. I was sure this had to be it. Now it was just a question of when. How long ago had Richard left that message in the bathroom? Had he already left?

The only person near the box was a woman in a trench coat with a paisley scarf wrapped around her head and high-heeled shoes. She was the only person looking intently at the standard. I couldn’t see her face. Maybe she was a friend of Richard’s mentor, Saul? Or some other contact?

The standard had different images on the back. I went around to the other side, pretending I was trying to get a look at the back, and sneaked a look at the

face of the woman.

“You idiot.”

Blue eyes glared back at me.

That familiar voice. That blond hair. The beauty that made you believe in eternity with a single glance.

“Richard!”

The face looking back at me from inside the scarf was as displeased as could be. Richard’s heels clicked as he came over to me, grabbed me by the wrist, and started walking. The room we were in was directly connected to the museum restaurant. You could take the stairs down from there and get to the exit.

“Come with me. We’ll get your things from the coat check.”

“I-It’s really you! I thought you were royalty or something!”

“I’ll give you a stern talking to later.”

The restaurant, which almost seemed to float in midair, bustled with tourists enjoying a break after a long day of appreciating art. We cut through the crowd and down the white staircase, retrieving my backpack and passport from the coat check. Once he’d picked up his items, too, Richard seized me by the wrist again. I didn’t have time to look back to see if we were being pursued. I was so glad I’d been firm about not letting Jeffrey hold on to my passport.

When we got out of the museum, Richard took off the heels he was wearing and threw them in a trash can before pulling a pair of men’s shoes from the box he’d handed to me and putting them on. He loosened the belt of the trench coat he’d had cinched tightly around his waist. He ignored the long line at the taxi stand in front of the museum and walked at a brisk pace a block down the road to catch a different taxi.

The moment the two of us got into the back seat of the black car, Richard shouted, “What the hell were you thinking?!”

“Sorry.”

“I didn’t ask for an apology!”

“But I am really, truly sorry!”

The taxi driver looked back and said something to Richard. I was like 90 percent sure it was something like “Settle down or get out of the car.” Richard apologized and gave him a destination. The car started moving, and I let out a deep, long sigh.

For the first time since I’d arrived in this country, I could finally rest.

“I don’t need an apology. What I need is an explanation. Why are you here? What did they say to you?”

What did they say to me? Right, Richard might think I was brought here by force. I guess that made sense. From his perspective, I had no reason to follow him. I wasn’t sure how to explain it so he’d understand. First, I needed to get him to believe that I hadn’t joined Jeffrey’s camp.

“I didn’t sell you out. Please, believe me.”

“Oh, trust me, given your personality, I know that all too well. I want you to explain what’s going on. Why are you here?”

I could just tell him I was here because I wanted to see him and leave it at that, but that wouldn’t explain anything. I needed to think. The world was spinning around me. Spinning? Why was it spinning? Right, I was dizzy. I was struggling to sit up straight. I had so much I had to think about, though.

“Seigi? Seigi. what’s wrong?”

“I...I’m trying to think...I just need a little more...time...”

I don’t know if I was overwhelmed by happiness or relief, but whatever it was, my mind had hit its limit. I probably startled Richard when I leaned into him, even though we weren’t going around a curve. *I’m sorry. But my body just isn’t listening to me anymore. I’m so tired. And so hot. I’m dizzy and exhausted. My head is pounding. And I can’t move another inch.*

The voice calling my name over and over grew gradually more distant.

I’d grown so used to these weird dreams. Dreams where I’d be asleep in my apartment, and Richard would peer at me from above. His lips would be moving

like he was trying to talk, but I couldn't hear a word he was saying.

At least, it was usually a dream.

"I see you're finally awake, my knight in shining armor."

I opened my eyes and saw an unfamiliar lamp hanging from the ceiling. I wasn't in my apartment in Takadanobaba. And I wasn't lying in my seat on the airplane. Right. I'd arrived in London. I'd gone to the museum and found a note, which led me to Richard.

"I must be dreaming... This really seems more like a dream than anything."

"Not to be pedantic, but are you sure you don't mean 'nightmare?'"

"But it's not a nightmare, not at all...I mean, you're here with me..."

It wasn't until I tried to sit up that I realized I had something hard and crunchy beneath my head. It was a crushed ice pack, half-melted and wrapped in a white towel. There was a handkerchief stuck to my forehead. I'd been changed out of the white shirt I was wearing at the museum and into the sweatshirt I had in my backpack. I guess he'd nursed me while I was passed out.

"I borrowed a thermometer from the front desk. You have a fever over a hundred."

"A hundred? I think your thermometer's broken..."

"Pardon me, Fahrenheit wouldn't make much sense to you, would it? That's a hair under 38 in Celsius. That has me worried. Please take it again. If it doesn't go down, I'm going to have to take you to a doctor. Did you get traveler's insurance?"

"I did. But who cares about me? Are we still in London? Shouldn't you get out of here?"

Richard laughed like I'd just told a joke. He looked like he was trying to humor a small child. When the thermometer he handed me beeped, it displayed only indecipherable numbers that I couldn't make heads or tails of, so I was forced to hand it back to Nurse Richard to interpret for me.

"Ninety-eight point five. It's gone down a bit. Thank goodness."

“...There’s nothing good about this situation. Are you sure we’re safe here? If we need to move, I can—”

“No. Go back to sleep.”

“You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Don’t worry about me. You just hurry up and get some rest.”

I shot him a look of protest, as if to say, “You’re getting so desperate, you’re saying weird things now,” and Richard scowled back at me. Wasn’t he fleeing from his estranged family? Well, I mean, I was all too aware I was in no position to say that, being Richard’s own personal walking disaster. Ugh. To put it mildly, I just wanted to die. Why did I have to catch a cold *now*?

“...I don’t remember anything that happened after we got into the taxi.”

“You passed out from your fever. You couldn’t even hold yourself upright, but you kept repeating, ‘I’m fine, don’t worry about me,’ like a broken record. You could walk with me supporting you, so I checked us into a nearby hotel. I was going to call for a doctor if you didn’t wake up after an hour.”

“I mean, look, I’m fine now, really.”

“I think I’ve heard quite enough of that for the next hundred years. I don’t want to hear it anymore,” Richard declared under his breath.

“...How did you know we were at the museum? Did you predict he’d take me there?”

“Selfies of the two of you were conveniently being delivered to my old email address in real time. You were traveling north from Big Ben with my cousin. The walk really brought back memories—it was our standard route on holidays when we were children.”

So it was a route Richard and Jeffrey, and presumably Henry, too, took regularly. Jeffrey had been sending out a message only Richard would understand all along. Which meant we *really* didn’t have time to be waiting around here.

“Richard, I’m fine now. I think it would be better if we—ow, ow, ow...”

“Don’t move. Lay back down. I have my own questions for you. Why are you

here? Who told you where I was? I didn't even tell Saul where I was."

While lying down on the bed, I told Richard about how the con man Sasaki accosted me and showed me that photo in the course of an argument we were having. Richard sat down in a chair next to the bed, covered his face with his hand, and sighed deeply.

"...That really was careless of me."

"If you mean that costumed stunt we pulled, yes, yes, it was."

"Men like that viscerally repulse me. They make me want to beat some character into them."

"Because they remind you of how you used to be?"

Richard looked surprised for a moment before smiling meekly and flipping over the handkerchief on my head. It felt nice and cool.

"I see Saul's been putting ideas into your head. I thought I had gotten through to him that showing you kindness would bring him nothing but trouble."

I assume that was the "He'll get attached if you call him by his first name" thing.

I still didn't really have an answer to Richard's question about why I was here. I thought I wanted to hit him at first, but now that I was with him again, I was so full of joy, it left me at a complete loss for words. I guess I was just the kind of guy who couldn't bring himself to say what he wanted to say when it came down to it. The same thing had happened with Tanimoto before.

But this time, I absolutely had to say it. If I didn't say it now, I might never get another chance. And that thought upset me so much that before I knew it, I found myself on the other side of the world.

"...I know this is going to sound selfish of me, but would you do me one favor?"

"It depends on the favor."

"It's nothing complicated."

"As I said, it depends on the favor. If you're worried about the room, you

needn't worry, I'll be billing you for the full amount."

I pleaded with him to stop teasing me and thought back to the time we went to that hotel in Yurakuchou. He was so kind to me. But what I wanted right now was something more real than that kind of considerateness.

"...Please don't disappear without saying anything to me. I'm begging you," I continued, and Richard fidgeted a little.

The room was silent. There were no other sounds.

"When you disappeared...I felt like a gaping hole had opened up in my chest. I was so worried, I couldn't do anything. I couldn't help myself, so I ended up here, but...I'm pretty sure I'd just be running around like a chicken with my head cut off if I hadn't been able to find you. So...please...I'm begging you..."

Just say something.

That was all I could say.

"There are some things talking can't solve."

"I'm not saying you should have told me everything! I don't care about that. Sure, I would've been curious, but it wouldn't matter. I just wanted *something*. Even a 'I can't tell you why, but I'm going to London and what I'm doing there is a secret' would have been enough."

"I believe you were paid the wages you were due and then some. What do you have to complain about? Why should I be obligated to go out of my way to tell you anything?"

Everything Richard said was true. It was such a sound argument. I'd expected as much from him. He was going easy on me. If he was really mad, if he really wanted to destroy me, he'd have much easier ways to poke me where it really hurt.

But I was a little tired of it, to be honest.

"Because I thought you and I were closer than that. No...I wanted to be closer to you."

"...You're being ridiculous."

“You think I don’t know that? I’m so stupid, it makes me want to cry. I had no idea how long I’d be working at Étranger part-time, but I guess I just started to feel like we might be able to start hanging out on our days off soon, or talking on the phone for no reason in particular. You never gave me the slightest reason to believe that, but I started thinking it would be nice. I know it was all in my head, though.”

This was embarrassing, even for me. But Richard just sat and listened without interrupting. So I figured I should just say everything I wanted to say while I had the chance. I had the feeling that if my fever flared up again and I fell asleep, Richard wouldn’t be there when I woke up. As long as his family troubles continued, he’d probably always be on the run.

“I like you. I like you so much, it scares me. I liked being by your side. Before I knew it, it became my new normal. And when I suddenly lost that, it was like I’d been tossed into outer space with no oxygen. Not being able to see you once or twice a week hurt so bad, my whole body was in shambles. No, it wasn’t even that. Even if I didn’t get to see you every week, I just needed to know that you were somewhere on this Earth, healthy and safe. But I didn’t even have that, so... So I was just so worried... I never even considered getting on an airplane or anything, but I was just so worried I did it anyway. Haha...isn’t it funny? Sorry. I know I’m just causing you more trouble. I’m so sorry.”

My head hurt. Everything I wanted to say was a jumbled mess. I was having that weird dream again. Richard’s face was right in front of my eyes, getting closer and closer. He always ultimately pulled back and gave me this awful smile. Why was I having that dream again? Wait. This wasn’t a dream. There was a strange lamp behind him—like one from a hotel. And not a cheap one either—wait?

“Stop talking for a moment.”

His face was so close to mine.

Richard’s beautifully formed nose slipped right past my cheek and rested next to my right ear. His slender arms were wrapped around me, squeezing my shoulders so hard it hurt. His body was pressed against my chest, but it didn’t feel heavy, because Richard’s feet were still on the ground.

His body felt a lot harder than I'd expected through the blanket. I could hear his heart beating at a different pace than my own. I was starting to space out a bit. It must have been because of the cold.

"...Look, I'm really so—"

"Stop talking."

"Yes, sir."

Richard had become like a rock as he hugged me. After a minute or so, he groaned.

"...You are so troublesome. Why must you always, *always* say you like me like that?"

"I know. That's why I'm—"

"You are a meddlesome child who is credulous to a fault. You rush headlong into things without knowing your place. Your sense of justice is so self-serving that at the end of the day, it leaves you with nothing but your own satisfaction. Futile doesn't even begin to cover it."

"You just keep going, huh..."

"So why is it that I can't bring myself to dislike you?"

Richard gave me one last squeeze before letting go and stepping away from the bed. *Wait. Please wait.* I was so scared he was going to just walk right out of the room. I still had more to say.

"I almost forgot. I have something for you. Don't worry, I brought the ring with me."

"Ring?"

"I got it from Saul to—"

Before I could finish the sentence, a sharp pain shot clear through my head. Maybe it was my blood pressure abruptly shooting up after Richard let go of me. I didn't manage to get it out in the end, so I just asked him to open my bag for me. Richard pulled a small bag with a combination lock out of my backpack.

"Yeah, that." I told him the three-digit combination between coughs, and his

pale fingers nimbly opened it. Out came a ring box. Richard froze, wordless for a moment.

It was the Richard ring. The one Saul had told me he'd inherited. I didn't say a word. Richard opened his mouth as he gazed at the old ring,

"How much did you hear about my inheritance?"

That's what we're talking about now? I was a little surprised, but I was pretty sure I'd gotten the gist of it on the plane.

"I heard about how if you marry someone who meets a certain set of qualifications, you'll inherit a diamond, and if you marry someone who doesn't, the diamond will get donated to the National Trust. Like some kind of evil puzzle."

"What else?"

"That it has to be a 'pure-blooded Englishwoman,' and anyone else is out."

"What else?" Richard asked again. What else was there? I couldn't think of anything, so I shook my head and Richard chuckled weakly.

"Sounds like you got about two-thirds of it. Even if I do get married, I'm not the one who will be inheriting anything. My future spouse will."

"Your spouse will?"

"Yes, the person who would inherit the diamond isn't me but the person I marry—in other words, a 'pure-blooded Englishwoman.' I'm basically nothing more than an ATM to facilitate the process. That's how the will works."

So basically, Richard was just a courier. No matter what he did, the diamond was always going to end up in someone else's hands, be it the National Trust or Richard's spouse. Of course, if it was a happy marriage, you could say that it belonged to both of them—but such a massive sum of money falling into someone's lap seemed like a recipe for disaster, even in a relationship that was going well.

I guess the earl never intended to leave the diamond to his grandchildren?

The more I learned about it, the stranger the will became.

“It just doesn’t make any sense. What was he even trying to accomplish with that will?”

“I gave up on trying to make sense of it a long time ago. People don’t need a reason to love each other, and they may not need clear, defined reasons for hatred either. You’ll just exhaust yourself trying to find meaning in his malice. But if I had to describe it somehow, I’d say it’s just an overly elaborate way for him to take his anger out on someone else.”

“Hey, does that ‘people don’t need a reason to love each other’ thing come from someone in particular?”

Richard looked at me with a vaguely exhausted smile. He probably wasn’t expecting that question.

“It’s something the man who raised me used to say. The ninth Earl of Claremont.”

“So Jeffrey’s father, the man who contacted you through the bank, huh?”

“I owe the earl a great deal. He’s more of a father to me than my actual father ever was. That said, I politely informed him that I have no intention of staying in this country in the long term.”

“...Then where will you go next?”

Richard didn’t answer.

I had a strange feeling about what was to come. It felt like my voice wasn’t reaching Richard’s ears at all. He wouldn’t look me in the eye, either. He was just vaguely looking in my general direction.

I’d never seen him look like that before.

I must have made a pretty ugly face in response, because Richard let out a sigh.

“You don’t need to worry about that. What the current earl’s sons want is for me to marry a woman who will do as they say, but to put it plainly, they can...”

Richard enunciated the two-word idiom with the precision of a vocabulary exercise. I don’t think I’d ever heard someone say, “Eat shit,” with such clear and perfect intonation. He put his whole body into that one.

“That is to say, their chances of accomplishing what they want are vanishingly small. I must apologize for using such vulgar language.”

“Curse all you like. It’ll make you feel better.”

I smiled, but Richard’s expression didn’t change. His unoccupied hands began fidgeting with the ring that bore his name.

“Saul told me that ring was something you inherited...”

I didn’t manage to ask who he’d inherited it from, but Richard answered my question nonetheless.

“From my grandfather. The eighth Earl of Claremont. I happen to share his name.”

Oh, so the son of the seventh earl who was disowned for marrying someone who wasn’t English was also named Richard. Richard was at the center of the inheritance issue because of the discriminatory clause in the will that Jeffrey had mentioned, and it had nothing to do with his name, but maybe it was some kind of fate.

“I’m surprised you held on to it.”

“There are some things you just can’t get rid of.”

That phrase sounded familiar. It was true that even if he got rid of the ring, he couldn’t get rid of his family. It was so very Richard to decide to just hang onto it, given that. He must have cared for it at least a little, to have given it to Saul to repair.

“Is that a thing all nobles do? Make rings with their name?”

“It’s a relic of an earlier time. And it is certainly not something everyone did. I don’t think making things of this nature for yourself has *ever* been quite that popular. Some consider them a kind of talisman or amulet. Some even say that with every pair of hands such an item passes through, the more power it gains.”

“Wait, then does that mean it’s not something your grandfather had made for himself?”

“In all likelihood, it was a gift from his father, the seventh Earl of Claremont. Every stone in the ring is superb, but what else would you expect from a

collector with an eye for three-hundred-million-pound diamonds? The beautiful stones are without sin, no matter how vile their owner might have been on the inside.”

A ring that spelled out his name given to him by his father—a man who would never approve of him.

I didn’t know if this was the fever talking, but it didn’t really make any sense. Maybe Richard’s grandfather also felt that the stones themselves were blameless. But it was still a gift from the man—even if that man was his father—who despised the person he loved so deeply he was willing to throw everything else away. Would you really want to give a ring like that to your grandchild? If it were me, I’d probably throw it away, bury it, or at the very least take it to the grave with me. Then again, maybe I would pass it on purely for its financial value to keep my grandchild safe. I mean, it did have a ruby and a diamond in it. But still, something didn’t quite add up.

I started spacing out while I was thinking. Someone was calling to me in the distance. It took me a few moments to realize that the voice calling my name over and over was, in fact, real. I guess I had started dozing off. That was close.

“Seigi? Are you okay? I shouldn’t have made you talk so much.”

“Nothing! I’m totally fine!”

“You should rest. You still have a fever.”

“How could I possibly sleep after I slept so soundly! I’m totally fine, okay!”

I tried to fill my voice with as much pep as I could, but it rang hollow even to me. But what else was I supposed to do? I was terrified of Richard disappearing again. I was sure that the moment I closed my eyes and let myself slip off to sleep, by the time I awoke, I’d find myself all alone in the room, bill already paid. And that would be that. I wouldn’t even have a way to contact him.

I’d said what I wanted to say, but he still hadn’t given me an answer.

I wondered if Richard had sensed why I was staring at him so strangely. The incredibly handsome man set the box with the ring in it on the bedside table, plucked the handkerchief from my forehead, and replaced it with his right hand. I really must still have had a fever for his delicate fingers to feel so cold. This

was hopeless. Why did my body have to give out on me now? It could have picked literally any other moment in my life and that would have been preferable.

I felt Richard's left hand slip under my neck, but I didn't feel his fingers. They must have been underneath the bag of ice. And he left it there. Just as I was wondering what he was doing, Richard pulled his left hand from behind my neck and switched it with his right.

"Wh...whoa..."

His ice-cold hand stroked my forehead. My breathing grew more ragged. Once his left hand had warmed up, he swapped it with his right, then the left again and so on. What was he doing? I guess he was chilling his hands with the ice and then touching my face.

I lay there, not saying a word, just breathing, when I heard a little giggle. Richard was laughing. Was he getting tired of this?

"How do you feel?"

"Great. I don't think I've ever felt this good in my life..."

"Well, I'm quite pleased to hear that."

His whisper-like tone felt nice in my ears. It reminded me of how my mother, Hiromi, would take care of me when I was sick when I was young. Whenever I let out a deep sigh, I panicked and opened my eyes again. *No. You can't go to sleep. Say something. You're dozing off.*

"Richard, there's something I've been wondering about this whole time, but I still don't understand... No, this probably isn't the right time to ask you this question, but..."

"I thought I told you to rest. What question?"

"When they said they didn't want people to think they were after your money," I said, and Richard stopped what he was doing just as he was about to switch hands again. Surely he remembered the conversation we had in Ginza just before he vanished.

"The diamond would go to the 'pure-blooded Englishwoman,' right? So it's

not like your spouse would inherit anything if you married someone who didn't fit that description, so...why?"

"Oh, but they would."

"Huh?"

"Even if I were to marry someone who didn't fit the criteria, they would still inherit something. In this case, the earl's collection of sapphires. Its value is said to be in the tens of thousands of pounds at most, but still a fortune. Admittedly, it hardly compares to the value of the diamond."

"....."

Now it made sense. That must be why Richard's old boyfriend decided to leave him.

No matter what choices he made, his love life would be forever haunted by an old ghost. Like a cursed shadow. If only we could cut it out with a knife, lock it in an iron box, and toss it in the ocean somewhere far, far away.

"...No matter what you do, you end up empty-handed, huh?"

"Indeed. Was that all that was weighing on your mind? If so, then—"

"I still have questions. I do. Um...I know, you said the sapphires are *said* to be worth tens of thousands of pounds. Does that mean you've never seen them yourself?"

"I have not. They are locked away. I'll only be allowed to see them when I present myself to the trustee with my prospective spouse."

"Then how can you know how much they're worth?"

"Jeffrey didn't mention that we have records of the purchases? There are official documents with the signatures of the trustee, who was acting as the earl's proxy for the purchase, and the sellers of the stones. You may be familiar with the term 'trustee' in the context of bankruptcy proceedings—a sort of government-appointed accountant—but the Claremont family's trustee holds quite a different position. Perhaps the simplest way to describe it would be somewhere between a government official and trusted friend of the family. The trustees don't have the authority to turn the gems over to us of their own

discretion.”

“Oh yeah... Jeffrey did say something about that on the plane...”

He’d said there was a family of trustees who managed the family fortune—kind of like a treasurer—and it was when the current trustee died that the secret will was unsealed, starting this whole mess.

“Richard, I’m sorry...I talked with Jeffrey about your past a little on the plane...”

“Your concern is unwarranted. He knows more about the details of this topic than I do.”

Richard’s affect was flat and devoid of emotion. I thought back to the conversation we had on the plane. Where did he get off comparing this to *Camille*? There was something overwhelmingly sad about his cold yet gentle hand against my skin.

“...That was so awful. What happened to you and your boyfriend.”

“Excuse me?”

“Uh...”

After a moment of awkward silence, Richard pulled his hand from my forehead as if he’d suddenly realized something and pressed his lips tightly together. I’d missed this expression of his. I got to see it all the time in *Étranger*. I kind of liked it, to be honest.

“Let me explain as briefly as possible. I am not gay—no, perhaps that phrasing might be unintentionally misleading, so allow me to amend that statement: Thus far, I have never had a romantic partner of the same sex. Clear?”

“Crystal!”

“Good.”

Richard looked relieved. I felt a weight lift from my chest. One of the mysteries I’d been pondering about for ages was finally solved, and the curse weighing on my heart lifted along with it. *You were wrong, Mr. Homura. You missed the mark.* I was so glad. The tension that had been weighing on me was probably the reason for the weird recurring dreams, too. Well, I’m pretty sure I

would have ended up here even if Mr. Homura hadn't said anything, but it had been bugging me.

Wait. Then why?

"Seigi?"

"...Your explanation was very clear just now, but then why—?"

"Because she was an Englishwoman of Turkish descent," Richard answered before I even asked the question. But that was all he said.

I guess it didn't matter either way—whether Richard's former romantic interest was a man or woman of Turkish descent, neither fit the qualifications to inherit the diamond in the will. Considering how global the world we lived in was these days, it didn't seem like there was much point in picking someone who had two British parents. None of it made sense.

"It's just so awful..."

"Getting angry won't accomplish anything. The man responsible is long dead."

"Wait, then where did your cousin get the idea that you and I were...?"

"That we were?"

I pointed at myself and then Richard in quick succession a few times. Please get the hint. He thought we were in *that* kind of relationship. At first, I'd thought it was just because I mentioned my weird dreams about Richard trying to kiss me when I was half-asleep, but he was too confident for that to have been it. I thought Richard might be mad, but he just shrugged.

"...I see. Well, that must have been most troubling."

"It wasn't troubling. It wasn't anything. But why did he think that?"

"Generally speaking, I don't think there are many college students—no matter how flexible their schedules might be—who would get on a plane to go after a 'friend' who suddenly disappeared like that."

Well. Yeah. I guess my weird behavior was at fault after all. I felt bad.

When I furrowed my brow, Richard continued, "However, I don't believe it was entirely your fault."

“Huh?”

In a low, uneven tone, Richard said that he didn’t want to make it sound like it was all my fault, before going on to explain his old “bad habits.”

“It’s difficult to strike the right balance when expressing fondness for someone.”

“Balance?”

“...When I was in elementary school, a friend of mine caught a cold. We were friendly with each other because we were in the same classes. It wasn’t too much work, so I prepared notes for him for all fourteen of our subjects. But the week after I’d given him the notes, he told me, ‘I love you, too, so please go out with me.’ I ended up slapping him.”

“W-well, that was his fault! He just got the wrong idea!”

“When I was in middle school, a friend of mine was very excited about getting to see his grandmother in Austria over the Christmas holidays, but there was a mix-up with booking the tickets and he wasn’t able to travel. He was very upset about this. I happened to have plans to go to the same area around that time for a ski trip I wasn’t particularly looking forward to, so I gave him my ticket and spent that winter at school. After the winter holiday, he presented me with a poem: ‘Your visage echoes in my heart always.’ I decided to take up boxing.”

“That must have been frustrating, but that was his fault, too.”

“When I was at university in England, I joined a male classmate whom I had frequent casual conversations with for a driving course to get our licenses. After taking seventeen road lessons together over two months, he came on to me, saying that he ‘wanted to go on a journey together to find eternity.’ I nearly punched him and caused an accident.”

“None of these were your fault! It was all on the other person! You don’t have anything to be ashamed of!”

Richard looked at me with gloomy eyes.

“You would say that. But expressing feelings of friendship and gratitude is so complicated. It seems that there is something excessive about my behavior by

normal standards...”

I knew exactly what he was talking about. I mean, what’s waiting for five hours at Shimbashi Station if not excessive? Hiromi had had a similar misunderstanding when I talked to her. But still.

“That’s not the fault of your face or your personality. It’s just because you’re such an incredible man. You can do things with ease that I, and most other people, couldn’t dream of doing even if we wanted to—so people misunderstand when they judge you using themselves as a baseline. Anyone who actually knows you would know at once that you’re just too kind for your own good.”

Richard closed his mouth and went quiet. I waited for him to say something. He dropped his gaze to the floor with a vaguely uncomfortable look on his face, then looked up at the ceiling.

“The world is vast, and there is always someone better than even the best.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Nothing, really. At any rate, considering the variety of other ups and downs in my life, and the particular career I’ve chosen, perhaps it’s not surprising that even my family would be under the impression that I might be gay or bisexual.”

At the end, Richard bowed his head a bit one more time as if to apologize. I nodded in kind. It was such a delicate issue. I was about 80 percent unsure, but the remaining 20 percent of me was excited—not that I was going to announce that. Plus, I felt a little thrill, like I’d pulled one over on someone I didn’t particularly like—

Wait. Couldn’t we use this situation to our advantage?

“Richard, hang on a minute, we should strategize our next steps.”

“Your ‘next steps’ have already been determined. Once you’re in suitable condition to travel, you’re going straight to the airport and getting on the first plane back to Tokyo. That is all.”

“But I might be able to help.”

“You really think you can beat a bunch of hyenas at their own game? The best

you can hope for is getting a taste of their rotten claws in your back.”

“Yeah, and then what? You’ll just disappear and I’ll never see you again?”

I sat up in bed and stared Richard right in the eye.

“You still haven’t told me if you’ll do me that favor I asked of you.”

Please, just don’t disappear again without saying a word.

Just tell me where you’ll be, at least.

But no matter how much I stared and prayed, Richard’s expression didn’t change. *I see*. Richard was too nice. He couldn’t bring himself to lie to me, if nothing else. I knew as much, but the reality was so cruel. I couldn’t do anything to help him.

I laughed, but Richard didn’t say a word. My throat was still hoarse, so I couldn’t really laugh very well, but there wasn’t much else I could do. Tanimoto gave me the push I needed to come to England, and I got what I wanted: I saw Richard again. And that made me so happy.

But I remained as useless as ever.

“Seigi.”

“It is kind of funny, though. I mean, I came from beyond the sea, just like the Standard of Ur.”

“...I never asked you to do that.”

“It’s crazy that you thought I’d get that hint you left, too.”

It’s not like lapis lazuli was something we sold a lot of at *Étranger*, and ultramarine had only come up in conversation all of once. Conversations like that piled up by the day, like dust on the carpet—enough to fill the store to the brim several times over.

“What would you have done if I didn’t remember that conversation?”

“Then you wouldn’t have remembered it, and it would mean it wasn’t worth remembering to you. I would simply pretend not to have seen those idiotic texts and photos.”

All that sounded like to me was that he didn’t think I would have forgotten.

And I obviously hadn't. But which was it? Did he trust me or not?

"I'll have you know, I—"

"Go home. Your job as a student is to learn. You're far too young to be sticking your nose into adult business."

"I could—"

"Leave. You would be much more useful if you weren't here."

His expertly articulated Japanese just slid by. Richard wouldn't look me in the eye. I finally understood—Richard didn't *want* me to help him.

He just wanted to protect me.

It was the same reason he refused to tell me what was going on, no matter how much I pressured him. What the hell? Who did he take me for? I don't think I'd ever felt so mad at someone for being *too nice* before.

"You're going to destroy yourself trying too hard to play the hero..."

"If only I could wrap that line up in paper and gift it back to you. Go to sleep."

"I mean, I'm just a part-timer, remember? It's not like you have any particular obligation to care about me that much. Just use me however it's convenient."

"If you persist with this useless prattle, I will bind your arms and legs with cables and *make* you sleep."

Did he really want to avoid talking to me that badly? It sure didn't seem that way. But every time I spoke, Richard's downcast eyes looked so pained, it hurt me to just be in the same room when he was like that.

"...If you're gonna tie me up, you better wrap me up like a mummy. Not that that would be enough to shut me up."

"Try not to get any inappropriate ideas. Very well, if you want to talk, let's talk about stones. That should be perfect for our decidedly cold relationship. Lay back down and just go 'uh-huh' every so often, if you insist."

And on that note, Richard began to tell the story not of the Claremont family's jewels but of lapis lazuli. It was like he was trying to say that I had nothing to do with his family's troubles. The Japanese name for lapis lazuli is *rui*. It's prized in

Buddhist scripture as one of the seven treasures. This wasn't really the time to be talking about that kind of stuff, but I knew if I kept pushing, I'd be no better than a child throwing a tantrum. I didn't want that. The thing I hated most in the world was seeing someone in trouble and being forced to leave without doing anything to help.

The little golden flecks of pyrite mixed into the stone made a single piece of lapis lazuli look like it held the entire night sky inside it, just as the first stars were beginning to show.

"If you're ever out in the countryside in Europe or western Asia during the summer, I recommend going out on the porch on clear nights at around nine or ten in the evening and looking up. You'll see more stars than you can count in a beautiful blue sky that you'd never be able to see in Japan. Gazing at a stone in your hand is all well and good, but it's nice to remind ourselves from time to time that this blue planet we call home is nothing more than a single rock in the vast expanse of space. It makes all your troubles feel small and inconsequential in comparison."

Richard placed a hand on my forehead again as he spoke. I tried imagining the sky in Europe at night, and Richard standing all alone somewhere in the mountains I'd seen from my window on the plane. It must be such a beautiful sight—so beautiful that it could bring you to tears.

"You're incredible, you know? I could see that blue night sky when I closed my eyes and listened to you."

"It must be the fever. You're still warm."

"...I remember now. Lapis lazuli is an incredible stone."

"You're still talking? What do you mean by that?"

I remembered a conversation I overheard Richard having with a client while I was serving tea. The client, who was really more of a mineral collector than a jewelry collector, was happily discussing the stones Richard had laid out—quartz, agate, and so on, but also lapis lazuli.

"Don't you remember that thing about how it's the 'strongest' stone?"

The client had claimed lapis lazuli was the strongest stone of all.

The notion that stones possess some kind of spiritual power has existed since ancient times, but the oldest records we have of such beliefs are about lapis lazuli. That's what made it the "strongest of all." It was good for just about everything—healing, encouragement, courage, comfort. A beautiful blue gem that could do just about anything. Like magic. I'm sure the people of the past felt that same power when they looked upon that mystical blue, and the artwork using it that had been handed down from thousands of years prior.

I started laughing again, and Richard looked concerned. *I'm fine. It's not the fever. If anything, I'm just getting tired of my own bullshit.*

"I mean, there's a legend that the older the stone is the more powerful it is, right? So clearly, the fact that we reunited in front of that ancient lapis lazuli box means it has to be a good thing."

"Were that the case, it should be impossible for any artifacts and ruins made of ancient stone to be destroyed at the hands of idiots."

"Good point."

People entrust their feelings to stones. Kind of like writing a prayer on an *ema*. But thinking it'd be nice if something happened and actually putting in the effort to *make* it happen are two very different things. I mean, the result wasn't even relevant—you could put in the effort and still not make your wish come true. For some reason, I saw Grandma in the back of my mind.

If you do bad things, they'll catch up to you.

Why did those words come to mind now? The person who did something bad was Richard's great-grandfather. But the person footing the bill for it was Richard. Why did it have to be that way?

Why was I always so helpless?

I asked Richard about something that had been weighing on my mind since Jeffrey told me about the inheritance thing yesterday. We'd been collectively referring to them as the "Claremonts," but unlike my sparse number of relatives, the Claremonts had to be a large and varied family. I wanted to know how all those people reacted when this absolutely unreasonable will was unsealed.

Richard remained silent for a moment before saying, “They didn’t, really.”

Which meant that, other than the seventh Earl of Claremont becoming something of a taboo subject in the family, nothing had changed in any meaningful way. The only people attempting to get involved were Richard’s two cousins. It was almost as if the others were trying to say that making trouble over a measly three hundred million pounds was unbecoming—all pretending the will didn’t exist, politely holding their tongues so that no one would make a fuss about it.

Richard seemed to correctly intuit what I was trying to get at—was there really no one he could have gone to for help?—and quietly declared that it wouldn’t have made a difference if he’d sought help. Not as long as he was born into the same generation as the current heir, and not so long as he was born to a French mother.

Richard’s theory was that the seventh Earl of Claremont’s plan was to get his grandchildren to fight amongst themselves over the inheritance.

“He must simply have been angry about everything—his son’s elopement, the death of his family, the fact that foreign blood had tainted his pure, noble line. Hatred has a way of hardening people’s thoughts, perhaps even more so for a lonely old man on the brink of death. But I have no obligation to indulge him. So I will continue to run as long as necessary.”

To my ear, Richard’s words sounded like “I’ll never settle down anywhere, not until the day I die.”

Maybe jewelry really was the perfect business to be in for globetrotting like that. But running from someone all over the world isn’t the same as traveling to whatever town or country you please, whenever you please.

Richard smiled at me weakly, like he could read my heart through my eyes.

“It’s not as much trouble as you’d think. I’m fluent in many languages, I have a job, and I do take some pride in my eye for gems. I’ve been doing it for the past four years. I’m quite used to it by now.”

He cocked his head quizzically when I fell silent. The tenderness in his voice when he asked me what was wrong made my chest feel all fuzzy. It must have

been because of the cold.

“I can see it now. You’ll go to, like, Argentina or Qatar with your black suitcase in tow and open a jewelry shop on a main street. It’ll be a nice, cozy little shop that serves delicious tea and sweets. And before long, you’ll hire someone part-time, and I just know he’ll grow to respect you deeply.”

“He will not.”

“...But.”

“I will not be hiring anyone.”

I went quiet, and Richard seemed to interpret that as a question. His lips contorted into a smile. It was the kind of smile that made me want to beg him not to smile like that.

“Why would I hire someone if I could manage better without them?”

It’d been ages since he first said that to me, but Richard’s expression bore no resemblance to the one he’d worn back then.

Richard had apparently asked Saul not to call me by my first name. Because I’d “get attached.” I wasn’t “attached.” I just wanted to be closer to him. I wanted him to depend on me. I wanted to repay at least a fraction of what he’d given me so far—that’s all. Make up for all the times I gave into cowardice under the guise of courtesy.

“...Richard.”

“I’m going to run to the shop. Is there anything you think you could eat? Fruit, maybe?”

“You know, you’re really...”

Suddenly, I heard a strange sound. A knock.

Knock-knock, knock-knock—someone was knocking on the door to the room.

Richard and I both immediately stopped talking and gazed at the door. There was a pause and then another knock. Was it hotel staff? They could just use the phone though. I whispered a question to Richard.

“Any ideas?”

“I did ask the front desk if they had any aspirin.”

“How long ago?”

“About when you dove into bed, half-conscious. Three hours ago, maybe.”

It was probably better not to open it. Richard walked toward the door, leaving me in bed. He didn't say a word. I could hear a voice, almost like a groan, from the other side of the door. It was English. Richard seemed to understand it, for he brought his hand to his lips in shock.

“...Henry?”

Henry? Jeffrey's unwell older brother? How did he know we were here?

While I was still flustered by this development, a cell phone started suddenly ringing in the room. The ringtone was Chopin's second nocturne. Whose phone was it? It definitely wasn't mine. Richard looked confused, too. Which meant it wasn't Richard's phone either? Where was the sound coming from?

I struggled to my feet and looked around. It was coming from my bag.

I searched through it and found a flip phone I'd never seen before in one of the outer pockets. I didn't understand what was going on, but I answered it. The buttons were pretty much the same between Japanese and foreign phones, after all.

“Oh, is that you, Mr. Nakata? It's Jeffrey. I apologize for interrupting your private time together, but it seems like my phone ended up in your bag by mistake somehow! Thankfully, I was able to track it with its GPS. By the way, Mr. Nakata, would you like to hear some encouraging news? I got word from one of our lawyers, and there's a chance that the diamond—”

Richard spun around on his heel like a robot and came toward me. He was terrifying. There was absolutely no expression on his face. I tossed the phone away like it was a red-hot piece of iron, and Richard caught it and shouted into it.

“I thought I warned you to stay the hell out of my life!”

And then he promptly snapped the phone in two. Its smaller components scattered on the floor. Richard slammed the remains of the phone into the

trash like it was nothing. I had no words. I'd never seen him like this before. I never knew he could get so emotional when he was angry. His blue eyes burned like fire.

Richard put the chain on the door and set a chair in front of it before turning around and heading back into the main part of the room. For some reason, he unlocked the door to the balcony, which was about two meters square, with a fashionable table and chairs on it and a set of emergency stairs off to the right. I guess you could exit through the balcony in the event of a fire. But wait, now? *We're running now? For real?*

"Seigi, just get yourself as dressed as you can. We're checking out. Don't worry, I'm leaving a large tip. If it comes down to it, my wealthy so-called family members are right there, anyway."

"What kind of life were you living when you were in Sri Lanka and Hong Kong?"

"We'd be here all night if I told you the whole story. Forget about the shoes, I'll buy you some Armanis."

"You got it, boss. I'd follow you to the ends of the Earth."

I'd said it jokingly, but I kinda meant it, too. I laughed, but Richard didn't reply. He just turned his back to me. Was that his answer?

I could hear the knocking persist on the other side of the door, but Richard ignored it completely. The hotel phone began to ring, too, and he couldn't have cared less. But then—

I heard what sounded like a shout.

"Mr. Nakata," the man in the hall called through the door. It was simple enough English that even I could understand it. "Please, save Richard."

He kept repeating those words over and over as he continued to knock. "Please, save Richard"? What was that supposed to mean? I froze, and Richard grabbed me by the wrist with such force, it made a loud smack. Why couldn't he just take my hand?

"They're just the ramblings of a ghoul. Pay them no mind."

“But...”

“All they care about is inheriting the diamond. Don’t fool yourself—they don’t care about you. You don’t need to listen to a word those people say. Go home to Japan.”

The combination of the phone ringing, the knocking at the door, the man’s tearful voice, and my fever distorted my senses. The noise of the city and the cold London air coming in through the open balcony doors blended messily in my head before I focused on Richard’s face. It was like a sudden burst of brilliant white light. He really did always look flawless, whatever the situation. But that face of his was a problem. It was so beautiful, it made him seem inhuman. It was the face of someone who wouldn’t hear you even if you tried to speak to him. The face of someone who had decided everything on his own.

Then what was I worried about?

Why bother trying to talk him down?

If that was how he wanted it to be, then what was the problem?

I didn’t need to go out of my way to say I wanted to help him.

I could just do the same thing he was doing.

That was it.

I wrested my arm from Richard’s grasp and dashed toward the door. I moved the chair to the side, undid the door chain and unlocked the door.

“Seigi!” Richard shouted, but I ignored him.

When I opened the door, a man just about tumbled into the room. His hair was more than half white. His blue eyes went wide when he saw me—the same blue as Richard’s. I guess that was the signature Claremont family color. But this guy didn’t look like he was in his thirties. He looked close to Saul’s age.

“Henry?” I asked.

“Yes,” he nodded. His eyes were full of tears. Was this really the same person who’d been sitting on a piano bench with Richard and Jeffrey on either side? He was skin and bones. It was hard to believe he could stand on his own.

I saw Jeffrey emerge from the elevators. He was shocked to see Henry and me and came running as fast as he could.

“Mr. Nakata! What did you do to Henry?!”

Jeffrey said something quickly in English, and Henry said something in response. Something about danger. Did he think I was taking Henry hostage? Henry looked surprised but returned to his younger brother.

I stared at the two men. These two blond men who both vaguely resembled Richard and had thrown his life into disarray. I could hear Richard calling my name from behind me. *It's too late now. You're the one who didn't want to listen.*

“Talk to me. He said something about saving Richard earlier. I take it that means I can help somehow.”

Jeffrey didn't seem to understand what I said for a moment. I couldn't blame him, considering how hard he tried to get me to hate him. But sometimes, things like this happened. Sometimes, something trivial could cause a seismic shift in someone's heart.

“Umm, I'm saying I'm going to cooperate with you. Do you understand me?”

“...Are you serious?”

“Ugh. Honestly, we're having a fight right now. He really pissed me off. It's like he doesn't even know how much I care about him. And to top it all off, he tells me not to make things so serious? Like, is that supposed to be a joke? Coming all this way wasn't exactly free.”

I couldn't hear Richard's voice anymore, but I was sure he could hear me. I scratched my head, trying to look nonchalant, while Jeffrey blinked a few times, seemingly in disbelief.

“I just figure if I can get something out of this, I might as well,” I said, looking back at the two astonished brothers as matter-of-factly as I could muster. “So? What do you need me to do and how much am I gonna get out of it?”

Case 4:

The Gospel of White Sapphire

THE MASSIVE LIMOUSINE we were in seemed out of place driving through the tranquil countryside. I expected to find a lot more Jaguars on the road in England, but that wasn't really the case. It was mostly Fords, Land Rovers, Toyotas, and Hyundais on the road. White sheep dotted the rolling green hills like clouds, grazing on the grass. I could see what I assumed was a church steeple off in the distance. What a peaceful vista.

"It's a nice area, isn't it? This is all part of the Claremont family lands—pastures that were historically used for grazing."

"Wow, this land belongs to the family, too?"

"Exactly. It's been rented out to shepherds for hundreds of years. More importantly, how are you feeling? I have to apologize for yesterday, I didn't realize you were in such poor health."

"Well, thanks to you, I'm right as rain now. Right, Richard?"

He didn't respond.

Jeffrey shrugged, and Richard just ignored him, continuing to stare out the window.

It was 11 a.m., and I was in the back of a limousine with seats facing each other. Jeffrey and Henry sat across from me and Richard, toward the front of the vehicle. We were headed for the Claremont family estate, which was outside the city. The trustee's family managed the house, which was supposedly a very typical aristocratic mansion. It had the latest in security systems, considering that the place was littered with old and expensive objects.

And it was also the place that held the seventh Earl of Claremont's prized jewelry collection.

I'd been sure it was stored in a safe deposit box at one of London's major banks, but apparently, the seventh Earl of Claremont's eccentricities extended

to the management of his jewels. He ordered that after his death, the collection was not to be moved. Like he didn't want anyone to see it. I guess there was a certain logic to it, if you could call it that. After all, the three-hundred-million-pound diamond was the centerpiece of the wicked surprise he'd left for his grandchildren.

Richard sat next to me, silent and refusing to meet anyone's gaze, almost like a doll.

The rest of yesterday had been a disaster. When Richard saw me making nice with Jeffrey, he froze, with a look on his face that suggested he'd just witnessed something completely impossible. His plan to escape through the balcony tragically fell through. The hotel room quickly became the location for an impromptu strategy meeting as Jeffrey made me a certain proposal.

"So, you see, while we were at the museum, I had a lengthy call with the lawyer handling the ins and outs of the will. We were talking about you, actually. I thought that maybe, just maybe there could be a chance."

"A chance of what?"

"That the diamond might be within reach."

Wow. Incredible. And who was getting that diamond? Me, obviously. Because I was Richard's spouse-to-be.

The only reason the hellish list the seventh Earl of Claremont had drawn up to disqualify potential candidates didn't violate some kind of human rights law was because of how particular it was in its language. It didn't say anyone who wasn't English was out. All it said was that if the subject of the will married such-and-such type of person from such-and-such area, they would inherit the sapphire.

Jeffrey and Henry had found a loophole.

"Ultimately, we confirmed that there was no clause in the will that specified what would happen in the case of a civil partnership with an Asian man. It was something people born in the nineteenth century came up with, after all—the scope of their imaginations was limited. So if you happened to have any interest in marrying Richard, that three-hundred-million-pound diamond could be yours. Even if the National Trust disputes it, our lawyer thinks we'd win. Man, I'm so

sorry, Mr. Nakata, I had you all wrong on the airplane. I'd appreciate it if we could call it water under the bridge. Why don't we split the three hundred million fifty-fifty?"

"A hundred and fifty million pounds, huh? How much of that would I lose to taxes, though?"

"We'll handle that for you. I think we're going to be *very* good friends!"

Richard kept his eyes on the floor, repeating over and over that I was just his employee, not his romantic partner, nothing of the sort. When I looked at him blankly and asked why he'd gone out to eat with me so many times, comforted me in his car while I was crying, and literally just got in bed with me earlier, the beautiful man didn't say another word to me. It was like he'd dealt me a non-verbal body blow—or maybe like he was a clam, snapping its shell shut.

Jeffrey was worried Richard might try to escape, but he didn't even try. Of course not. He wasn't the kind of person who'd abandon me and run off on his own.

We spent the night in the hotel. In the morning, Jeffrey and Henry picked us up in a limo. Our destination: the Claremont family estate. The thing about the civil partnership was we didn't need to give public notice in advance, so as long as Richard and I were there together, that qualified me as his "future spouse"—and we would be shown the diamond.

Richard had said exactly one word to me when I went to his room to wake him up that morning.

"...Why?"

He could have given Henry a run for his money in a contest of "who seems least able to stand up straight." He looked like a gemstone smeared with ash. Like his sublime beauty had taken on an ephemeral quality. He looked like a soul-sucking ghost.

But I said, in the cheeriest tone I could muster, "Why? Isn't it obvious? Because I love you."

Richard clammed up again, but he followed me into the limo nonetheless, all the while staring off into space. I felt like a pet owner dragging his sick dog

around. We spent the next two hours on the road heading northeast of London. Jeffrey chatted enthusiastically with me in Japanese, occasionally translating for Henry and trying to get him to smile, but Henry was too worried about Richard to pay attention to him.

Richard didn't say another word.

Jeffrey seemed fed up with the atmosphere in the car. He let out a frustrated laugh.

"Aren't we in a foul mood today, Your Highness? Shouldn't you have a smile on your face? Your boyfriend is going out of his way to free you from that insufferable curse. You'll get your happily ever after, and if things go well, you'll be rich to boot—what's not to like?"

"He's probably just feeling shy. It's cute, isn't it?"

"You can say that again. I'm sure if all the people Richard has spurned found out about this, they'd be furious. So, who made the first move? What attracted you to him? Don't worry, I won't judge."

"I fell for him the moment I saw him. It wasn't so much a 'move' as me constantly telling him I liked him until he gave in. And I like everything about him. Nothing about him could ever make me hate him."

"My dear cousin is a lucky man. Oh, hang on, let me translate for Henry."

Richard was looking out the window, but he wasn't really looking at anything. It was like he was blocking out our voices even without covering his ears. He was less like a doll and more like a corpse that had been reanimated by mistake.

Jeffrey asked when we'd be arriving. Seemed like we'd be there in about ten minutes. I groaned that my headache was back, and he gave me an aspirin. I took the opportunity to type up a text on my phone. I knew no one was looking at me, but I still made extra sure Richard didn't see what I was typing. I couldn't send it yet, so I used the scheduling function. Three hours from now should be enough.

While I was typing, the limo arrived in front of an ostentatious gate. The driver said something into a camera, and the gate opened without a sound. The long road ran up a hill to the mansion.

My first impression of the mansion was that it looked like a miniature version of the Diet or something—a collection of old stone buildings, with little flashes of light above the lawn and in the nooks of the walls that were probably surveillance cameras. The “yard” surrounding it—well, it might be better to call these “lands”—was big enough to be a golf course. *And* it had forests and ponds and rivers. There were flocks of ducks flying in the distance. I bet there were probably boars and deer, too.

Under any other circumstances, I would be trembling with excitement to be here.

An old man with white hair was waiting for us at the door to the mansion. He wore an impeccably tailored jacket and stood straight as an arrow. His eyes were dark blue. He must have been in his late sixties.

“Allow me to introduce you, Mr. Nakata. This is Mr. Benjamin Garrett, the loyal trustee of the Claremont family who has been caring for the seventh Earl of Claremont’s prized diamond. Well, I guess he’s technically the second, after his father. But that all ends today.”

Jeffrey smiled. The older man glared at me a moment, before looking over at Richard and saying something to Jeffrey, who pulled some documents from his bag and began talking as briskly as a trial attorney. Mr. Garrett briefly looked confused before finally sighing and walking over to Richard.

I promptly stepped in front of Richard, who looked slightly surprised. But Mr. Garrett walked around me without saying a word and asked Richard something.

Namely, “Do you truly love him?”

You could have cut the tension between me and Jeffrey with a knife. Crap. We hadn’t anticipated that question. What would Richard say? Richard looked at me, standing there awkwardly. With neither joy nor malice, he pointed vacantly at me and said, the words almost a sigh, “Ask him.”

Mr. Garrett looked at me with a frown. He probably thought I was just some random Asian guy who Jeffrey had hired. I wasn’t sure what I’d do if he asked me how much I loved Richard—how much of a performance I could put on with my paltry English skills. I started constructing sentences in my head, but Mr. Garrett walked right past me without saying a word. I guess the answer was

obvious enough.

He opened the door, having given up, I guess.

The inside of the mansion was like a different dimension.

A gold chandelier sparkled over the red carpeted entryway. The room would have looked perfectly natural if it'd been dotted with people in black-tie attire. If anything, I felt a little out of place in my jeans. The stairs that led to the second floor were lined with patterned carpet, and there was a marble statue of a woman holding a flower vase on the landing. Was this Richard's childhood home? I couldn't even begin to compare it to my own. This place felt less like a house and more like a piece of history.

Mr. Garrett looked at me and Richard, as if to ask us to follow him, and began walking up the stairs.

"Go with him, Mr. Nakata. You're going to see the diamond."

"R-right now? Isn't this kind of fast?"

"The trustee and the lawyer finished talks yesterday. There's no point in fighting it now. Richard and his future spouse are the only ones with the right to inspect the property, so we'll be staying here. Tell me all about it when you're done. I'm dying to know." Jeffrey laughed. "For a hundred years!"

He offered Henry his shoulder for support. Henry didn't seem like he was doing very well in the car. I hoped Jeffrey would take him somewhere to rest.

I looked over at Richard.

He wasn't looking at anything, just obediently following Mr. Garrett like a lamb to slaughter. I trailed behind them with Jeffrey's eyes on me.

Once we got to the top of the stairs and I was sure no one was following us, I shoved my hand into one of the pockets of my jeans and gently poked Richard in the hip. His blue eyes looked weakly at me. I looked him intently in the eye, pulled my hand from my pocket, and took his. His blue eyes went wide, like he could feel it.

"It's a letter."

In my hand was a rolled-up strip of paper. All I'd had at my disposal was the

notepad provided by the hotel room, but it looked like a crushed cigarette or something when I rolled it up.

“Read it later. Not now.”

I smiled once I was sure Richard had taken the rolled-up paper and stowed it in his pocket. He was still out of it, just staring blankly. Good. I pushed past him and followed Mr. Garrett. Finally, I’d be face-to-face with the fabled diamond.

The second floor of the Claremont mansion was as wide and lavishly decorated as a luxury hotel. Then we hit a point where it changed worlds entirely. Brawny men who looked like security guards were lined up in place, and after getting patted down, I went through a metal detector just as I had back at the airport. It only looked like a 19th-century room on the outside—the inside was less like an aristocratic mansion and more like a bank vault. The walls were thick. Even if the tranquil countryside suddenly came under heavy machine assault, you’d probably be safe if you were in this room.

Richard and I had our personal effects confiscated. Mr. Garrett then pulled a box from his breast pocket, opening it to reveal a key that looked more like a golden stick with a ring on the end. He took the key and inserted it into the wall in the back of the safe room, using a card key and fingerprint reader, too, before finally the door opened.

Inside was an antique table and chairs. Strangely, it looked almost exactly like Étranger’s interior. The chairs were comfortable-looking lounge chairs, though they weren’t red, and the table was made of glass. There was a safe built into the back wall.

We entered the room, and the door slowly closed behind us.

I sat down in the right chair, and Richard sat in the left. Mr. Garrett turned his back to us as he unlocked the final safe. I checked Richard’s expression and found him still staring off into space, eyes cast down. It was a little out of character, but I was glad—I wasn’t sure what I would have done if he’d been more on guard.

Memories washed over me—the night we’d first met, the bug zappers in Yoyogi Park were like spotlights. He was so beautiful, I thought my heart might

stop. When he taught me how to make royal milk tea in Étranger’s kitchen. The beauty with which his fingers opened his box of treasures. The way his leg would bounce sometimes when he ate the pudding I’d worked hard to make sure I didn’t burn. The transcendent kind of beauty he had when he talked about gemstones.

Mr. Garrett turned around. In his hands was an old-looking black velvet box. He tore the tightly wrapped paper seal. If that box held the diamond, it must have been massive. I gulped. *You can do this.*

He set the box on a golden tray and gently put it down on the glass table.

More memories—the story Richard told me about diamonds. How they became the standard for engagement rings. And how the prices were fixed by a monopoly. How they were the “hardest stone on Earth.” A stone made of carbon.

His wrinkly hands opened the box. One second was like an eternity. I felt like my heart might jump out of my mouth.

More memories—when he explained the difference between hardness and toughness. All being the *hardest* material on Earth meant was that it was very resistant to scratches and abrasions. Diamond was surprisingly brittle. Throwing one against a wall or something similar would fracture it with ease.

Richard looked at me with a start. I see—he’d been secretly reading my letter while he had his eyes cast down. But it was already too late.

The moment Mr. Garrett opened the box—

I snatched up the sparkling white gemstone and threw it with all my might.

“Seigi! Stop! That stone is—”

Richard grabbed my arm the moment the diamond left my hand, tackling me. Both my chair and body tipped over at the same time, and I ended up on the floor, still seated. Meanwhile, the diamond flew through the air.

The massive, sparkling stone seemed to fall so slowly.

And then it hit the edge of the table with a *ka-thunk*, bounced off, and fell to the floor.

It had to have broken, or at least cracked, right? Surely I'd fatally wounded it, right? Mr. Garrett shouted and sounded the alarm. The doors opened up and guards streamed in. *Please be broken. Please. I'm begging you.* I mean it had to be, right? That's how diamonds worked. I didn't even want to consider that something Richard told me could have been wrong.

Please be broken. Like a snowball hitting the asphalt during a snowball fight.

I wrenched my arm away from Richard and was immediately pinned down by two men on either side. I already knew what was coming. They were probably going to beat the crap out of me, but I was ready for it. I'd taken a painkiller and everything. Admittedly, it was cold medicine, but still.

"Mr. Nakata, what happened?!"

Jeffrey came rushing in and the guards drew his attention to the stone on the ground. I guess they were telling him I'd thrown it. Jeffrey mumbled, "Oh, God," and rushed over to it—

"Stop!"

Richard stopped him in his tracks.

He stood up and straightened his clothes before quickly kneeling on the rug to inspect the stone. I hadn't seen his gem-expert face in a long time. Henry came into the room moments after Jeffrey.

Richard gently picked the earl's greatest treasure up off the floor, and his eyes went wide. Jeffrey frowned. Was it broken? Please be broken.

But I was surprised at what Richard said next.

"...It's a white sapphire."

Huh?

"It is not a diamond. It is a sapphire. The value is...perhaps several tens of thousands of pounds at most."

Richard repeated the same comment in English. Richard's two cousins angrily asked him what he was talking about, but Richard had his professional jeweler's face on. He looked resolute and powerful, a man who wouldn't let himself be abused by selfish customers. And a man who would not tell a lie about a gem.

“Garrett, is this the compensation in the case that the spouse is not a so-called pure Englishwoman?”

“This is what you call appropriate?! Hurry up and throw this man out!”

Jeffrey tried to order the guards to throw me out, but before they could start pulling my arms, Richard shouted something back at them. I had no clue what he said, but they let me be.

Mr. Garrett stood between Richard and Jeffrey as they glared at each other, simply repeating what I could only assume was a prayer under his breath. I did make sure I didn't hit him when I threw the diamond, but I guess I must have startled him. Although that didn't entirely explain his reaction. The trustee looked like his soul had drained out of him as he murmured something under his breath.

If my weak English listening comprehension wasn't failing me, I was pretty sure he was saying, “Good Lord, it was true...”

The fields dotted with grazing sheep extended as far as the eye could see.

Despite being told the land all belonged to a certain someone's family, as someone more accustomed to Japanese standards, it didn't really feel real. I knew the class divide was still alive and well in this country from skimming guidebooks, but I never realized just how big it was.

I sat on the chaise longue set up by the double window, enjoying the view. There wasn't really anything else I could do. The guards had grabbed me again and tossed me in a room on the second floor of the mansion. It didn't look like it'd been in use for a long time, but it had been cleaned recently, and the large windows had a great view. The door was locked, but I could go to the bathroom if I called to the guards keeping watch outside. All things considered, it was a pretty warm reception.

It was close to 2 p.m. when I heard a clink and the door opened again. I'd been locked in there for over two hours.

Richard came in with a tray of food. A mug of tea, a fluffy piece of bread, and some soup. If this had been a hundred years ago, that would have been my last

supper, not my lunch.

“I’m here to give you that stern talking-to.”

“...I’m very, very sorry.”

I tried to stand up and get on my hands and knees to apologize, but my fever seemed to be flaring up again and my body wouldn’t cooperate, so I just tripped over my own feet. Richard set the tray of food down on the little writing desk in the room and helped me up, sitting me back down on the chaise. Before I had the chance to apologize, he pulled a chair up in front of me and sat down.

“Before you eat, we need to talk. Is the room too cold?”

“No. Other than being hungry, I’m totally comfortable. The oil heater’s doing its job.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Now, to get to the point.”

Richard took a little breath. I tensed up.

“What the *hell* were you thinking, you idiot?!”

“I’m so sorr—”

“I’ve had enough of that stock line. What would you have done if you had smashed that stone?!”

Richard ended it there. It was pretty short for a talking-to. What would I have done?

“...Nothing.”

“What compelled you to do such a thing?”

“I mean, everyone would clearly be better off if that stone didn’t exist.”

Gemstones were things that helped lead people in the direction of their true desires. But that “diamond” was no such stone. It was a stone with a curse on it, designed to drag the living people of the present down a path someone from the past desired. And because of that, neither Jeffrey, nor Henry, nor any of their other relatives could lift a finger against the will that bound Richard. And the curse wasn’t exactly going to lift itself, so...

...I figured I’d smash it to pieces.

Richard went quiet. I never expected him to understand. I mean, it was three hundred million pounds of property damage we were talking about. I wasn't even trying to steal, but destroy. This went a bit beyond bad manners. The damage was intentional, so my traveler's insurance would surely have been of no use. I was just happy they didn't kill me on the spot. Honestly, I still didn't quite believe I'd gotten out of that room unharmed.

"When we played Old Maid in elementary school, I always wondered what would happen if whoever drew the old maid just secretly threw it in the garbage."

"Don't be absurd. Did you really think you'd get away with that?"

"Of course not. I knew I was doing something I'd never be able to make up for, even if I spent my whole life trying. But I figured that would be my problem to deal with alone, at least."

My father, Mr. Nakata, wasn't related to me by blood, so he could cut ties with me without much trouble. And I had no relatives left on my mother's side. None at all. And my mother, Hiromi, she could—ah!

"Richard! Let me have my phone back! I left it in the safe room!"

"I brought it with me, obviously, but why are you in such a hurry to get it back?"

"Just hurry! I set it for three hours!"

Crap. It really was down to the wire. Richard pulled my phone out of his pocket, and I quickly unlocked it, opened up the scheduled messages, and deleted it. Phew. I made it. But that was when I realized. Richard had been watching the screen the whole time.

"Uh..."

The text of the message was extremely simple. It was addressed to Hiromi. Just one sentence:

I'm so sorry, but please just assume I'm dead.

That was it.

I think that would get it across loud and clear that something had happened

to me. It might have made her cry from shame, but she wasn't the kind of person who'd ever approve of someone knowingly doing something wrong, even if it was her own son. I was pretty sure she'd tell me to figure out how to fix it myself, since I'd gotten myself into the mess in the first place.

That was why I wanted to settle it in a way that made it all my problem.

After a few moments of silence, Richard aggressively grabbed me by the collar and pulled me to my feet. His eyes were a deeper blue than usual as they burned with rage. If they were usually the color of the sky, they were now the color of a frozen sea.

“‘Just assume I’m dead’?! To your own mother?! Don’t you value your own life?!”

“I totally understand why you’re mad at me, but I could ask you the same thing.”

Richard loosened his grip in response. I plopped back down on the chaise, fixed my collar, and then looked up at Richard.

“What was that yesterday anyway? You basically told me you were going to spend the rest of your life alone.”

“...It wasn’t your problem to deal with.”

“Yeah, and?! You’re a person with a life, too, aren’t you?! Are you really going to tell me that a stupid little rock is going to make you keep turning your life upside down, never making friends or falling in love?! You have to be kidding me! How do you expect me to—”

“Stop sticking your nose into other people’s business!”

“I care about you so, so much, I can’t even stand it, but that’s why I’m equally angry with you!”

Richard shut his mouth, seeming taken aback by me suddenly raising my voice. Good. This was probably going to be my first and only chance, so I’d say everything I’d been wanting to say.

“You’re such a coward. You come into my life, you worry about me, you’ve helped me out more times than I can count, but the moment I offer you a hand

for once, you tell me it's *not my problem*? What was I supposed to be? Some pet you keep in a cage and happen to feed or something? Someone who'll just sit there and thank you with a smile, wagging my tail like an idiot?"

"I've never once thought of you like that! But this playing hero thing has to stop somewhere!"

"Playing hero?"

I laughed, and Richard's expression hardened. Was he afraid of me? It was a marvelous sight to behold.

"That's not funny. I was prepared to become the villain of the century, you know."

If you do bad things, they'll always catch up to you.

That was what my grandma always said. If you took it at face value, it was simply a reminder not to do bad things—but Grandma had survived by doing bad things. So maybe it had a slightly different nuance. No one does bad things because they *want to* but because they *have to*. You just have to be prepared for the consequences to catch up to you.

Yesterday, I made up my mind that I was ready for whatever consequences awaited. I decided to do it, and I did.

The look on Richard's face told me he didn't understand. He was still doing it. He was still trying to be nice to me. I wanted to tell him to stop already, but that would probably make him react by being *even nicer*. How frustrating.

"To explain, I was trying to smash that diamond into a million pieces."

"I know that, but why—"

"Well, just listen. Anyway, so if that diamond got smashed, or broken, or damaged at all, it'd lower the price a ton, right? And the diamond can't just be put back together either. And no one would have to care about you getting married anymore. That was good enough for me. Sure, I'd end up in police custody, but you'd be freed from that horrible will and wouldn't have to spend the rest of your life alone. You could go wherever you liked and tell whoever you might care for that you love them. You could have a family and all the

friends you want, and you wouldn't have to worry about any misunderstandings being too kind to people might cause. You could even adopt a dog. Of course, you could live alone too if that was what you wanted. But when you're off somewhere living happily with someone else—I was sure you'd remember me. Once a month or once a year, you'd think to yourself, 'That idiot part-timer of mine is probably still serving time somewhere for what he did.' Wouldn't that have been great?"

"...What's so great about that?"

"Well, you'd never be able to forget me. You won't be able to spout nonsense about not wanting to be someone special to each other or not leaving marks on each other's lives anymore."

Richard's eyes burned with rage again. *Good. One more push.*

"And it'll serve you right, too. Just you try living your life all alone, then."

This time, Richard snapped. He balled up his fist and pulled back for a punch. He had pretty good form, too. If he actually threw that punch, it'd hit me square in the face. I put on my best forced smile, donning the kind of face that'd definitely make you feel good to punch.

But...

Richard's fist stopped just before making contact with my cheek.

"Huh?"

I looked up, surprised. Richard seemed to have snapped out of it. He was calm. He was Richard the jeweler, the one who existed in Étranger back in Ginza.

"What? Surely you should be used to this sort of thing. I've heard there's a rule in your beloved karate to pull punches at the very last moment, disallowing actually landing a hit."

"No...the school I went to was a full-contact one. We beat the crap out of each other."

"Is that so? Allow me to try that again."

And with renewed energy, Richard karate-chopped me on the head. It was a

playful hit, the kind you'd expect to come paired with a funny sound effect. Huh? Was what I'd said really that lighthearted? I was going for something dark and gritty—like, you know, life and death, love and hate. That sort of thing.

I remained baffled. Richard looked at me the way one might look at a beloved pet. He crossed his arms and cocked his head to the side. His enchanting smile was asking, "What's wrong?" His expression was calm and composed.

"Are you done spouting all that drivel?"

"You're...not mad?"

"Not in the slightest."

"...But why?"

"How could I be, with such an atrocious performance?"

"Huh? Wait...seriously?"

"Alas, it was extremely unfortunate."

"...Sorry?"

"You took your little joke too far, idiot! If 'sorry' could solve everything, we wouldn't need the police, now would we?! Even my Japanese textbook mentioned that!"

He gently chopped me on the head a few times in quick succession. It hurt a little. I kept my head down, and Richard hit me a third time for good measure before stopping. I was lucky he didn't actually study karate.

I lowered my head again and apologized. Richard tossed a rolled-up piece of paper into my lap. It took me a second to recognize it. It was my letter.

"...Did you read it?"

"Your handwriting is atrocious, so I couldn't."

"What? Oh, come on...it's legible."

"Not in the slightest."

"It's the recipe for the pudding I always made you."

It was a no-bake recipe. You put the egg mixture into a cup and steamed it in

a saucepan, kind of like you would for *chawanmushi*. If you cut the heat at the right time, it usually turned out just fine. If you had all the tools you needed, it was just three steps. Well, there was one more if you wanted to add the caramel sauce to the bottom of the container.

He told me he wasn't much of a cook earlier, but reading and translating were well within his wheelhouse. I figured that if I left that recipe for him, he could have someone else in whatever country he happened to end up in make it for him. That way, he could stuff his face with his favorite food again, while doing that thing he did where he leaned forward a little and smiled without trying to look like he was smiling.

It's not like I needed to be around to see it.

Richard didn't say anything. I shoved the recipe he returned to me back into my pocket and forced an awkward smile.

"Umm, I guess I should turn myself into the police then."

"You will do nothing of the sort. Don't be ridiculous. That wasn't even a diamond to begin with."

"Actually, could you explain what happened back there? Mr. Garrett was saying something, but I couldn't understand it at all."

Richard got up with a sigh and offered me the tray of food. I guess he was giving me permission to eat. *Really? Are you sure it's okay?* I looked to him for confirmation with sparkling eyes, and he urged me to go ahead. *Thank you very much.* I started with the soup—or at least what I thought was soup. I didn't realize until I took a bite that it was oatmeal porridge. It didn't really taste like anything.

"You can listen while you eat. I'll tell you all the inane details of your once-in-a-lifetime performance."

Mr. Garrett—who held the keys to the safe, and who looked like his soul had drained out of his body when Richard announced that the diamond was not what it appeared—apparently knew that already. He knew that the three-hundred-million-pound "diamond" he was taking care of was no diamond at all but a sapphire. But he didn't believe it.

“He thought it was a lie or some kind of delusion.”

“What?”

“His father, Mr. Eugen Garrett, who was given the direct order from the seventh Earl of Claremont to keep the diamond safe, suffered from an extreme case of dementia in the last decade of his life. As a result, there were some rather severe discrepancies in the information he conveyed to his son. He must have assumed that particular fact was simply the illness talking. There was a three hundred-million-pound receipt, after all, how could the diamond be fake?”

“Then, but...why didn’t he just open the safe and check? Surely he had the power to do that!”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full. It’s bad manners.”

I shut my mouth and let the porridge fill my stomach. It was the sort of thing that was supposed to be easy on the digestion, and I could attest to that. I flashed Richard a look, like I was going to clean my plate, and he continued.

“He did not have the right to open the safe. Ultimately, he serves the Claremont family and is legally bound by the will. The only time he was permitted to open the safe was to carry out the seventh earl’s hidden will.”

“...So just now, basically.”

“Indeed. On top of that, Garrett explained that before his memories started to go, his father told him, ‘The safe exists not to protect its contents but to keep them sealed away.’”

“.....”

All I know is that, if I were him, I would have checked, “right” be damned. I don’t know. But I sure wish he would have. I mean, he was the only person who had the key to the safe, and someone’s life was on the line—a person’s life could be massively upended, all because of a diamond that could very well be fake. But maybe I was being too naive.

“Why did the earl do all this, though?” Did he know that, too?

Richard looked intently at me.

"I think the truth of the situation has become more or less clear. It was a very well-engineered fraud."

"Fraud?"

"The seventh Earl of Claremont purchased the sapphire as a diamond."

"W-was he stupid or something?! How could he mistake a sapphire for a diamond?! Especially for an earl whose hobby was jewelry collecting!"

"I don't think he made a mistake. I believe it was deliberate."

Deliberate? He made a mistake on purpose?

I frowned, but Richard's expression didn't change. Yes, this was his normal face. The face of Richard the jeweler. Richard when he was doing what he did best—my favorite Richard. What happened to that angry wildcat from before? Not that this was the time to be getting distracted by that.

"The box with the stone in it wasn't the only thing tightly sealed in that safe either. It was hiding letters as well. Missives between the seventh and eighth earls—between the violently racist father and his son who eloped to Sri Lanka."

"...Were they letters from before the son was disowned or something?"

"No. After, in fact. This whole affair did involve fraud, but perhaps it would be better to describe it as a sort of tax evasion. It was also ultimately pointless."

Richard pulled some old papers out of his jacket. There were about five pages. Richard translated three of them aloud for me.

"My beloved son, I pray for your happiness every day, but I do worry that your health may suffer in such an unfamiliar environment. I hope that you and Leah will join hands and build a family that will respect both of you. While our lives have not changed a great deal, aside from your absence, I do feel the chill wind of loneliness from time to time."

"My beloved father, I hope you can forgive me for the delay in my reply. It took quite a while to receive your last letter. The war in East Asia does not appear to be going well. There have been rumors of Axis vehicles coming here, too, but I don't believe it to be true. Surely the war will not come to England. I may be able to return home soon."

“My beloved son, please do not consider returning to this island. It would be bad enough were you to return alone, but if you returned with Leah, you would be subject to a level of humiliation you would not be able to endure. Even if we are far apart, I hope that you remain in good health.”

Those were the three letters written in cursive. One of the letters was a carbon copy. It was signed and dated a year before the war. The paper looked old, too, so it seemed authentic, but I couldn't believe it.

“What...is this?”

“Leah is my grandmother. She was a white woman who became a Sri Lankan citizen—though it might be more accurate to say she was a woman with no family to speak of. She was raised by local missionaries. Her mother died of illness, and she never knew her father. She was born in a gem-mining town and had never once set foot in England, despite ostensibly being English, so she considered herself Sri Lankan. It's not hard to understand why his entire family was vehemently against their marriage.”

“Jeffrey did tell me some of that, but that makes even less sense.”

The earl got into a fight with his son over this and disowned him. So what were these letters? Were they forgeries, too?

Richard presented me with the remaining two pages. They were also letters. He began to translate them into Japanese for me again, knowing that there was no chance I'd be able to read them.

“This charade has gotten rather out of hand. I worry I might actually become a believer in white supremacy, at this rate. I received the diamond from Eugen. Send Leah my thanks. Her heart sparkles just as brightly as this stone.”

“I thank you for all you have done for us. The people of her village truly are incredible. All I can offer is our best wishes. My beloved father, you are never far from my thoughts.”

The earl's letter was a carbon copy, and the one from his son still had its envelope with it.

“I'm sure handwriting analysis would confirm that these were written by two different people, but I am familiar with my grandfather's handwriting. I'm

certain that my grandfather wrote these to his father.”

“Then...”

Why did the earl disown his own son?

I looked confused. Richard explained plainly, “Who exactly got to decide the rules of society? I haven’t the faintest idea, but the one thing I can say is that even an earl at the beginning of the twentieth century was not free from those fetters.”

“...So, um, what’s a believer in white supremacy?”

“A racist. They believe that pale-skinned, blond Europeans—whom they term ‘Aryans’—are superior to all other races. They believe in a racial hierarchy. Later, their beliefs were influenced by Nazism. As they believe persons of Asian and African descent to be lesser, they felt it was a moral imperative to advocate against marriages with them.”

“In other words, people who would never be allowed to set foot in Étranger.”

“I’m glad you’ve correctly understood the shop’s rules in that regard. But you see, in the seventh earl’s time, racial discrimination wasn’t against the law. In fact, there were many people who tried to advance that ideology at the time. If I were to tell you that Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859, would it give you some sense of how the people of this era viewed the concept of race? They believed it was scientific fact that white people were the most ‘advanced’ race. It’s essentially a devil’s proof—we had to wait until genetics research had advanced enough to prove that racism was utterly baseless. While it may be possible to correct one person’s ignorance, the ignorance of millions results in violence.”

“...Please continue.”

The seventh earl was his father’s second son. His older brother, the eldest son of the family, was meant to distinguish himself while fighting in Africa, come home, and devote himself to his studies. Instead, he died of influenza, and the second son moved up in the succession and came to inherit the title of earl. But his position was unstable, and he was surrounded by people who held the kind of beliefs that would get them banned from ever setting foot in Étranger.

“You might say he was beset from all sides,” Richard whispered. “As the seventh earl’s legitimate son, he was most likely to inherit and become the eighth Earl of Claremont. However, his late brother’s sons had fairly strong claims to the title, too. So if you think about the line of succession, that further complicated matters.”

Images of foreigners dressed in costumes out of a period drama filled my head. I thought I might try imagining them as Japanese people, since putting it in terms of a *Taiga* drama might make it easier for me to follow. All right, so there’s strife over succession in a lord’s household. There’s a current head of the house, but he doesn’t have a lot of support, and there are several candidates to be the next lord. Amidst all that, the current leading candidate to be heir has started expressing a desire to marry someone who, by the standards of the time, was an absolutely unfathomable choice for marriage. I guess it was like if he fell in love with a common village girl or something. Or in other words, someone who wouldn’t have qualified under a certain secret will.

“And for the seventh earl, this was, umm...let’s just call it a big headache, I guess?”

“Exactly. He loved his son dearly but was all too aware of the unstable environment that surrounded them. He was not in a position to do as he pleased at that time. And the property the seventh earl would be leaving to his heir—that is, the title and its associated estate—was essentially communal, belonging to the entire family. He was really nothing more than temporary custodian of those assets, and he could not deviate from the rules of succession or move funds around however he pleased.”

I remembered Jeffrey saying something about that. About how the English nobility traditionally passed an entire estate’s assets onto the eldest son, which prevented assets and lands from being divided up and was why England’s aristocracy still existed in more than just name, compared to other countries. Even though they were nobles—or I guess *because* they were nobles—they couldn’t just use their money however they pleased. Especially when it came to inheritance.

“What would you have done in his position? If your son, who had grown up wanting for nothing, wanted to marry for love and could not be convinced

otherwise, causing him to leave home with hardly a penny to his name? If you were to consider his spouse's social standing and the power dynamics within the family, you can see how he would be concerned about his grandchildren's position in the succession."

"Well, I'd...I'd send him money. If he needed money, I'd send it to him..."

"How much, and how often? Would an ordinary amount of money be enough to satisfy him? Don't forget, the world is headed down the path to war. You don't know when you might lose contact."

"I'd send as much as my family would allow!"

"Your family is vehemently against it."

"Then I'd just send it without telling them!"

"And that's exactly what he did."

Three hundred million pounds' worth, Richard said. Enough money to start a company three times over. I couldn't stop thinking about what I'd even do if I got my hands on a gem worth that much. At least, I *thought* I'd put a lot of thought into it. But I never really considered that buying the gem might not have had anything to do with actually acquiring it.

"The truth of the transaction is that it was a deeply human piece of fraud. The earl purchased a white sapphire for three hundred million pounds using the trustee, Mr. Garrett, Sr., as his proxy. He sent his son money in a way no one could complain about, when in reality, it was an advance on his inheritance. He would have sent his son money under the guise of purchasing a completely nonexistent gemstone if necessary—but that son had married a woman from Ratnapura, and as you might expect, someone born in a gem-mining town had her pride to reckon with. That sapphire was nothing to sneeze at.

"Obviously, since it survived your rough handling, it wasn't actually worth three hundred million pounds. How robust a gem is isn't measured by its hardness but by its *toughness*, and diamond happens to be less tough than sapphire. While sapphire is a bit tougher than diamond, it's not unbreakable. The fact that it didn't break is proof of how free of inclusions and impurities the stone is. Not that I imagine anyone expected it to ever be handled in such a

manner.”

“I am extremely sorry for that!”

“You don’t need to apologize. When you threw that stone, it rekindled my love for you.”

“...Are you being serious?”

“I’m kidding, of course. May I continue?”

“Oh, um, sure.”

Right, that wasn’t the end of the story. We hadn’t even gotten to the will yet. If he wasn’t actually a racist, then what was the awful list that was eating Richard up inside all about? It seemed like an act of revenge.

Wait.

When Richard saw my expression change, he flashed an exhausted smile.

“Did you figure it out?”

“Did...did the earl not expect his own son to inherit the title?”

Richard gave me a “bravo” for the first time in ages. It made me happy, but his voice was thick with weariness.

“If they hadn’t all died in that air raid, it was much more likely that one of them would have become the next earl. And that clause in the will was directed at *their* grandchildren.”

Which meant it *was* the earl’s revenge...but it was meant for the bigots who were against his son’s marriage. He wanted to throw what they’d done back in their own faces by leaving them that life-destroying, family-breaking sapphire and ultimately wasted spite. But ultimately—

“Remind me, Mr. Yamada, what do they say happens to those who wish ill upon others?”

“...My name is Seigi Nakata, you know. They end up digging two graves, Master Baxter. But—”

I was about to say that I thought it was weird to put it that way, but Richard put his hand in front of my mouth to stop me before I had a chance. I guess he

still had more he wanted to say.

The earl didn't know when his plot would be put into action. He just sealed the white sapphire away in the safe and prepared his cursed will with the condition that it would be unsealed upon the death of the trustee, Mr. Eugen Garrett, the only other person who knew the truth about the "diamond." Richard said he thought it was obvious that Eugen hadn't been aware of the hidden will. If he had been, none of this would have happened. The earl had probably made Eugen's death the trigger for the will's unsealing to protect his involuntary accomplice, but that kindness had backfired.

I suddenly thought back to the message I'd nearly sent Hiromi earlier. Our relationship may have been bumpy, but we'd spent all twenty years of my life as mother and son. I felt obligated to say something, even if it was horrible, so I did. But thinking about it now, I was really glad I didn't send that message.

Hard as it was to imagine, what if the earl had been in a similar situation?

The frustration must have started getting to him—spending day after day pretending to be someone he wasn't, surrounded by people he couldn't stand. Maybe that was what inspired the plan. It was a way for him to relieve his stress by venting all the things he couldn't say to anyone, somewhere no one would hear him. Maybe it made him feel better to imagine the chaos he'd cause among the relatives who were so awful to his son as he worked on that massive discriminatory list. And maybe he set it all up in the safe not to actually put it in motion, just intending to undo it all when he felt better.

But death snuck up on him. The Blitz. I wondered how different it was from the Great Tokyo Air Raid my grandma had told me about. She told me that the whole city burned, leaving rivers of dead and survivors who would get caught in the carnage and eventually burn to death, too. Humans don't get to choose when they're born or when they die. Not the earl or the family members he despised.

But when his son got word of his condition and rushed back to England with his wife, the earl's last words were "What are you doing here?!" I finally understood what he actually meant by that.

Because the people who'd be falling into the cursed grave he'd dug were his

beloved son's descendants.

"...It's a little much, even for an ironic twist, huh?"

"You can say that again."

But why didn't the earl try to fight?

He wasn't a single mother forced to pickpocket. He was a man with power and influence, if nothing else. Why didn't he just say he wouldn't tolerate anyone speaking ill of his son and that there was nothing wrong with marrying a woman from another country? Even if other aristocrats criticized him for it, couldn't he have fought back and told them to get stuffed?

I asked as much of Richard with my eyes, but the beautiful man just shrugged softly.

"You're the only person who can decide if your actions are right or wrong. The seventh Earl of Claremont was lacking in neither wisdom nor sense, but perhaps what he did lack was the courage to bear the weight of his own life on his shoulders. If only he could have taken a page out of your grandmother's book."

"You make it sound like you're talking about a complete stranger."

"Because I am. I've never met the man."

"....."

Sure, he was trying to protect his beloved son and all, but those feelings grew twisted and eventually became an ill-fated trap.

I let out a sigh and clutched my head.

"Ughh..."

"Are you okay? Are you still feeling dizzy?"

"No, that's not it. It's nothing like that, I just..."

I set my now empty tray of food on the writing desk and lay down on the chaise. I knew it was bad manners to fall asleep right after a meal, but that wasn't why I had to lay down. I mean, if all that was true... What was all my resolve for? I'd prepared myself to pay for this for the rest of my life. I'd prepared for Richard to hate me forever. I'd prepared to live on with

Tanimoto's smile nestled in my heart like a jewel, because even if we never got any more intimate with each other, she'd made me plenty happy already...

What was all of that for? I felt like my soul might leave my body.

Richard came over as I lay there, head in my hands. He was smiling. Good, he looked a lot calmer than he did earlier.

"...Well, whatever was going on, I'm glad. Now all the fuss about you getting married is over."

"Is that so? Well, perhaps we should get to the actual reason I'm here then."

"Huh?"

This whole conversation wasn't the reason he was here?

I looked confused. The smile immediately vanished from Richard's beautiful face. He was like a mannequin. A beautiful face and nothing more, right in front of me. I couldn't read his expression at all. I'd never seen him like this before. It was terrifying. What even was that? What was he trying to tell me?

"I did say I was here to give you that stern talking-to."

"...But didn't you already—"

"You really think I was going to leave it at that? I was simply not confident in my ability to speak without letting off some steam first. I am calm now, so I can deliver that lecture. Now—"

I stiffened up, and Richard's blue eyes swelled with intensity.

"Seigi Nakata, you don't understand a damn thing."

"...I don't think you've ever called me by my full name like that before."

Richard continued speaking to me in a very matter-of-fact tone, his emotions still not showing on his face.

"You mentioned earlier that you took such reckless action because you wanted to leave an indelible mark on me. But I am not so naive as to believe you would say such drivel in earnest. Being deceived by your god-awful acting once is more than enough. I want a real explanation. Why did you do it?"

A real explanation? That's easier said than... I mean, the only reason I can

think of is “because I was really angry.”

Yesterday at the hotel, Richard was focused entirely on protecting me. I knew he’d left Japan because he didn’t want to burden me. I came all this way because I wanted to be useful to him in some way—so I could repay even a fraction of all he’d given me so far—and he just ignored how I felt and wouldn’t say anything to me but “Go home to Japan.” And that just made me so sad and frustrated, I couldn’t take it. So I decided to take the offensive. If Richard was going to do what *he* wanted to do and protect me, then why couldn’t I do what *I* wanted to do and protect him?

I’d be the first to admit that was a really arrogant way to think. Maybe Richard could get away with it, but I was out of my depth. I mean, who the hell did I think I am? I knew all that.

But how else could I possibly be of use to him?

How could I make the path of this sweet, meddlesome man who was forced to say he’d live his whole life all alone just a little bit brighter?

I explained as much to Richard, but the emotion still didn’t return to his face. *Just be mad at me or something. Call me an idiot or stupid or whatever.*

But his beautiful face wouldn’t give me a clue as to what I should do.

As I remained confused, Richard shook his head.

“No.”

“Huh?”

“You still don’t get it at all. That’s not the real reason behind your actions.”

“No, but...I was being completely honest just now...?”

“What you need to examine is your hopeless lack of self-awareness. There’s a much deeper problem lying within. Can you not see it? I’ve spent just under a year with you, and you’ve done the same thing over and over again.”

“...What are you talking about?”

“Your desire to be useful to someone.”

Richard ignored my “what?” in response and continued.

“You said it yourself that one night. That you’re scared of being a disappointment to the people you love when you can’t do anything to help them, that you don’t want to be called coldhearted. I think your concept of a hero is much closer to being a useful tool for someone when they’re in trouble. In short, it is this feeling of powerlessness that torments you and is the source of your reckless behavior.”

I felt strange. It was like Richard’s face kept getting bigger and smaller. Like I’d been staring at the same thing for so long I’d lost all sense of perspective. His ever-beautiful face was still devoid of emotion. I didn’t know what I was supposed to do. When Richard was happy, I was happy, and when he was sad, it made me sad, too, so—wait.

Was I basing my actions on Richard’s mood?

No, no, come on, that’s not weird. I mean, I want Richard to be happy, but Richard’s mad at me, so...huh? Wait? What?

Richard got up from his chair, made me scoot over on the chaise, and plopped down next to me. His expression still hadn’t changed. I didn’t know how to react. This man who was as beautiful as a work of art made me anxious with his almost artificial beauty. I didn’t know what I was supposed to do. I was scared. I wanted Richard to smile, but his face was like a mirror, and through it I was staring into the depths of my own soul.

“I don’t think it’s particularly admirable to describe a person’s feelings as a ‘curse’ in the twenty-first century, but it seems I have unintentionally placed a curse of sorts upon you. That night in the car, I told you that you weren’t wrong. Just as I inherited that ring that bears my name from my grandfather, you inherited both your name and your indomitable spirit from your grandmother. You are kind to those who are weak, and you walk the path of what is right. And truly, your approach to life is noble, upstanding, and beautiful. But we all have our limits. Your strong desire to be useful to others is wonderful, but you shouldn’t let it dictate your entire life. And why is that? Because there is only one person who can play the leading role in your life—and that person is you. And because the people who love you want you to be happy. Whether you are useful or not, whether you are a contributing member of society or not, whether the people around you appreciate you or hate you—none of that

matters. Those aren't the most important factors in anyone's life. Surely you understand just how much strength people can summon when they desperately want their loved ones to be happy."

When Richard finished, he gently raised his right hand and placed it on my cheek. The same hand he so carefully handled gemstones with. It was soft, and cold, and tender.

"All the people who love you want you to be happy, Seigi."

"....."

"And of course, I count myself among them."

His blue eyes were looking right at me. I finally understood what he was thinking. It really was quite a "talking-to." But I still didn't know what I was supposed to do. I didn't think I'd ever had someone tell me something so incomprehensibly kind before. It was a strange feeling—like water was flowing into solid rock in the depths of my heart, and a long-dried-up river had become a new water source all at once. A *very* strange feeling.

He wants me to be happy.

I felt like I'd said something similar to someone else before. Right, it was to Mami, the woman with the ruby. I didn't think I'd ever be able to forget her. But because she had no idea how much the disrespect she was doing herself was hurting the people who cared about her—

I got on my high horse and told her that caring for herself more would make other people happy, too.

Oh.

I'm so stupid. I should get an award for how stupid I am.

I went silent as a stone, and Richard smiled slightly. Even the tiniest change in his expression was immediately obvious from this distance. It'd been a while since his beauty knocked me out, but I really loved seeing him smile.

"Get it now?" Richard said teasingly through slightly pursed lips.

I gave a trembling nod, and Richard told me "bravo." And then he wrapped his arms around my waist and drew himself toward me. A hug. I could feel the

weight of his head on my shoulder. He was so warm.

“I don’t want you to become a tool to be used when trouble arises. I want you to be Seigi Nakata, my dear friend. Were you under the impression that I would take advantage of your kindness to use you and then discard you? If so, what an unbearable insult. I ought to challenge you to a duel to defend my honor.”

“...What kind of duel?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Karate versus boxing, the first one to fall loses.”

“There’s no way I could hit you in the face!”

“Then how about a verbal duel instead? I win if I can make you cry.”

“...I’ve already lost, then.”

Instead of saying, “I know,” Richard moved his arms from my waist to my back, hugging me tightly. He was putting a lot more strength into it than he had in the hotel yesterday. Last time, it had felt like he was just trying to comfort me while simultaneously calling me stupid, which just made me feel more pathetic. This time, it felt like he was encouraging me to stand strong.

An astonishing volume of tears poured onto Richard’s back. It felt like my eyeballs had been replaced completely by tears. Were they really all mine? Were humans really capable of producing this many tears?

I wrapped my arms around him and groaned, and he patted me on the back. I squeezed him back as hard as I could. Richard tapped me on the shoulder, like a sparring opponent asking for a break, and pulled away from me. He quickly got up from the lounge and swiftly strode over to the window with the nice view, clearing his throat in a way that seemed rather forced.

“What’s your problem... You could have hugged me a little longer. My face is a mess...”

“I am not your personal towel. Go wash up. Actually, it might be better if you just called for a maid on the intercom to bring you a towel. Surely you can manage that level of English conversation.”

I had no confidence I could manage even that much, so I shook my head. Richard frowned, looking amazed. He wrote down a simple phrase for how to

ask for something for me, explained how the old intercom worked and how to operate the heater, and then stopped talking. He had a serious look on his face. I could guess what he was trying to tell me. It was about Jeffrey and Henry. The two of them, or definitely at least Jeffrey, probably wanted me dead for real.

“I went ahead and borrowed your passport to arrange your return ticket. Please get on the flight tomorrow morning back to Japan. However, you will spend the night here. I would like to strongly advise you not to leave this room if you can help it, but I have no intention of keeping you confined, and you may run into someone unexpectedly on your way to the washroom. Therefore—”

Richard drew his face in close to mine. His expression was still serious, but for some reason, he looked almost a little flushed. I guess he was nervous, too.

“Promise me this: You will not utter a word other than ‘hm,’ ‘um,’ or ‘uh-huh’ to my Japanese-speaking cousin.”

“Huh? But why?”

“Am I clear?”

“Um, is there a reason?”

“Am I clear? ‘Hm,’ ‘um,’ and ‘uh-huh.’”

I silently nodded my head. And Richard looked satisfied.

“Good. Then so long as your health permits it, might I recommend taking a stroll about the estate? This is a building with over two hundred years of history. I find it rather soul-soothing. If anything happens, you have my number. But do be wary of my Japanese-speaking cousin.”

“I get it, all right. I’ll try.”

“You don’t need to try to do anything. You can just ignore him.”

But why was Richard so on edge? He must have had a lot of negotiating to do while I wasn’t around. I didn’t really know what was up, but it was obviously my fault, so I decided I should behave and do as he asked.

But I did have a little something I wanted to do.

I told him I was going to head to the bathroom and then explore a little, and I

went down the stairs into a big hall. I looked for someone to ask for directions to the kitchen and found a maid at work dusting, who made a weird face at me before showing me there. All the gadgetry of the safe room was decidedly absent in the kitchen, which was still using a gas stove and full of pots and pans that looked quite old.

The maid left once she got me a pot, a frying pan, eggs, milk, and sugar. Crap, I didn't have any containers to put it in. I didn't have any option but to poke around myself. The Claremonts already had probably the worst possible impression of me, so it wasn't like I could make it much worse.

"Boy, you really pulled one over on me," I heard a vaguely childish voice say from the other side of the door connecting the kitchen to the hall.

I turned around and found Jeffrey standing there, one hand raised and that familiar fake smile on his face.

Crap. It didn't look like there was any other way out of the kitchen. And to make matters worse, there was no one else around, as far as I could tell. I considered calling Richard, but I didn't think he'd be able to get here in time. I was pretty sure I could take Jeffrey in a fight, but it would be real bad if I actually hurt him. Besides, he was Richard's family. It was out of the question.

"I mean, you really got me. You really are something for a Japanese guy. You should be proud to have fooled the people of Shakespeare's homeland so thoroughly."

"...Uh-huh."

"Whatcha doing down here? Feeling hungry?"

I knew I wasn't supposed to say anything other than "hm," "um," and "uh-huh"...but honestly, Jeffrey showing up was just what I needed. I didn't have enough containers.

"Um, do you think I could borrow like four containers about the size of a teacup?"

"You're cooking?"

"Uh-huh."

“Four containers, huh? Would teacups without handles work?”

Jeffrey quickly grabbed the phone, dialed a servant on the intercom, and gave her the order. She brought the requested items. Judging by the fact that he had no idea where the tableware was kept, it seemed chores weren't something he had much to do with in his day-to-day life. It was going to take some courage for me to submerge those beautiful rose-patterned cups in the pot.

I bowed my head slightly and awkwardly spoke up.

“...Thank you very much. But I can't talk to you about anything. Please don't try to force me.” I earnestly declared.

Jeffrey laughed out loud and said he understood how Richard felt. I didn't have the slightest clue what he “understood,” but I just wanted to finish what I was doing and get out of there. I put the pot full of water and the frying pan on the heat and cracked the eggs into a bowl. I mixed in the milk and sugar to make the pudding mixture.

“You sure taught me a lesson. I regret underestimating you. You really are incredible—you really did show us how much one person can love another.”

“...Huh?”

“Oh, don't play dumb. I heard it all from Richard. That you ‘were willing to take on a three-hundred-million-pound debt even if it meant never seeing each other again, just to free the person he loved,’ and that you ‘acted rashly entirely out of love.’ Did your standards of behavior get frozen in the era of chivalric romance somehow?”

“Uh, hm! Um!”

I almost choked. *I see.* Now I understood how Richard had explained away my rash behavior. If our positions had been reversed, I doubt I would have been able to come up with a better reason either. I'd done something not even the most thoughtless and impulsive of young people would dream of, so really, the only plausible explanation was something vague and intangible, like saying I'd done it “out of love.”

It was all my fault. I'd have to apologize to him later. This was definitely not the time to be saying anything rash, though.

Jeffrey was still standing next to me, showing no indication that he was going to leave.

“Man, and the real kicker is that it wasn’t a diamond at all. And we found those letters the seventh earl hid, too. Now I’m in a real bind, and Henry won’t even get out of bed. Well, at least he still has an appetite.”

“...Uh-huh.”

“So many unexpected things keep happening—your behavior included—I can hardly keep up.”

“Uh-huh.”

I set the pudding mixture aside and put some sugar by itself into the frying pan. For the caramel sauce. I just needed to add some to the bottoms of the cups, lower them into the pot of water, add the pudding mixture, and steam for ten minutes before putting them into the fridge. Then the magic item to cheer Richard up would be complete.

I melted the sugar in the frying pan and listened to the water sizzle as I added it. Jeffrey tried to get my attention one more time as I continued through the simple procedure.

“I’m asking you for real here: Did you really want to free Richard? By doing what you did? Did you really think that would make him even the slightest bit happy? You supposedly love him so much, but you couldn’t even imagine what would happen to him if you smashed that diamond into a million pieces, could you? You wouldn’t have freed him—quite the opposite. He would have turned against his family and even the police to save you, and spent the rest of his life trying to atone to you.”

“.....”

Of course, I imagined it. That’s why I’d tried to make Richard hate me at first, playing the role of Nakamura the Crusher to make him regret trusting such an awful person. I’d thought that would work, at first...but I guess I was too naive.

I gave a vague shake of my head. Jeffrey let out a little chuckle and shrugged.

“He’d probably prefer to die with you over that.”

“Uh, hm, no...I absolutely wouldn't want that.”

“Well, good. Sorry about the lengthy preamble. I wanted to apologize to you. I'm sorry, Mr. Nakata. As I learned from our governess, however, if 'sorry' could solve everything we wouldn't need the police—though, admittedly I'm not sure you'd get very far going to the police over what I did, so I guess apologizing is really the only option I've got.”

“That textbook of yours sure had some interesting sentences in it, huh?”

“Well, our governess wrote about half of it herself. She wanted to teach us practical things, so we could get by without difficulty if we were dropped in the middle of Tokyo all of a sudden. I wish Henry could have learned with us, but he was already in high school and everything... Anyway, I don't know if you believe me, but I am genuinely sorry for the way I treated you.”

I was going to tell him that I was trying to use him, too, so we were basically even and he didn't need to apologize, but Jeffrey just groaned and furrowed his brow. In the meantime, the water in the pot began to boil. I timidly placed the caramel-filled cups into the water and poured the pudding mixture into them. I noted the time before putting on the lid. Everything was done. I just had to wait ten minutes.

Jeffrey seemed to be waiting for me to say something. He let out a little sigh when he realized that he could wait all he liked, but I wasn't going to talk. He seemed to have made up his mind about something.

“...Then let me put it this way instead. I'm glad. I'm really glad.”

“Huh?”

“I'm really glad you're a fan of chivalric romance and not tales of lovers' suicides. He's such a gentle soul. If he were driven into a corner with someone he truly cared about, I know that would be his last resort.”

“.....”

“I was prepared for him to hate me for the rest of his life, you know. I know this is rich coming from me, but I was kinda hoping he was off in who-knows-where being happy. So I'm glad he has you for a partner. I've done my fair share of making him miserable as it is.”

“...If you just told him that, I’m sure—”

“It’s not happening. He’ll never forgive me for what I did.”

“You can’t know that he’ll never forgive you until you’re both dead. I think you’d both be better off if you could find a way to forgive each other. You’re family, after all. Please. Even if it takes some time, please, talk to Richard at some point. ”

“Please,” I repeated, and Jeffrey fell silent. He seemed a little bewildered, like he hadn’t expected me to say something like that. He let out a deep sigh.

“...You sound like some kind of superhero. I guess as the villain in this story, I’m obligated to listen.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Oh, come on. Plus, you’ve led a pretty hard life for someone so young.”

“...Maybe I have, but not as hard as you and Richard have had it.”

“Oh! Oh no, oh no, no, no. You’re too much like Richard. You’re too sweet for your own good. You need to be more suspicious of people and keep your distance when it comes to relationships. Well, this isn’t good—Richard really needs someone more levelheaded by his side.”

I forced a smile and looked over at the clock before cutting the heat to the pot. Despite all the twists and turns, this guy was still Richard’s “big brother” at heart, so I was pretty sure it’d work out in the end. Richard’s heart might still be frozen, but I thought he was the kind of person who was better at forgiveness than holding a grudge for the rest of his life.

“Well, I guess I’ll have to tell him to fall in love with someone like that, then.”

“I think he’d throw ice water in your face if you told him that. Richard said you were postponing the civil partnership, but you can always come back to England. It’s easier for gay couples to live in England than Japan, right? Though it is just as hard to get citizenship as people say.”

“Uh, um, uh-huh, hm, um.”

“By the way, what are you making? *Chawanmushi*?”

“It’s supposed to be pudding, but...”

“Pudding? Really?”

Jeffrey explained that in England, pudding can refer to a lot of different kinds of dishes. I explained that in Japan, what we call “pudding” is a smooth egg-based sweet that you chill in the refrigerator before eating. Jeffrey’s eyes went wide at my explanation. He let out a long “ohhh.”

“That takes me back! I remember this! Our governess used to make it for us as a reward for a job well done. Right, that’s what it looked like. These little, shiny...you know, there was a time when Richard would study himself half to death just to get a bite.”

“Really?”

“Huh? Wait, why are you making it then? You didn’t learn the recipe from Richard?”

I shook my head, at a complete loss for words. I explained that it wasn’t anything special, just my mother’s overly simplified recipe. This was already a pretty significant departure from just saying ‘hm,’ ‘um,’ or ‘uh-huh.’

Jeffrey sighed and nodded his head over and over.

“...What an incredible coincidence. If you’re making four portions, mind if I have one?”

“You’ll have to ask Richard. I’m making it for him.”

“Oh, don’t torture me like that. I already know what he’s gonna say. Why don’t you just tell him you only made three to begin with? I’m willing to pay.”

“No, um, I don’t think that’s going to work.”

“Why?”

I pointed behind him.

The prince stood in the door connecting the kitchen to the hall, which Jeffrey had left open, his arms folded. *Nice to see you, Richard.* Jeffrey smiled awkwardly.

“Hey, Richard. Um...I was just having a little chat about the good old days with

Mr. Nakata here.”

“Seigi.”

“Yup?”

“Your promise.”

“Yes?”

“Did you keep it?”

“Yes, sir.”

Richard came into the kitchen as he spoke. Jeffrey’s eyebrows drooped as he smiled.

“I dunno how I feel about such a formal, Japanese-style relationship. You should treat him with more warmth, like we do in England.”

“How I treat my significant other is none of your damn business.”

“...I just mean in general.”

“We’re fine, truly. Never been better even.”

Richard pinched me on the back. When I groaned, he wrapped an arm around my waist and squeezed me tight. He wasn’t looking at me—he was just glaring at his cousin.

“We’d prefer to be alone.”

“...Take your time.”

Jeffrey pulled his hand from his chest and waved goodbye with a childish look on his face as he left the kitchen. Once he was out of sight, Richard removed his arm from my waist. We both took a step apart and let out a sigh.

“That was terrifying. I thought I told you to call me.”

“Nothing happened. I don’t have anything he wants anymore, anyway. But I did find out why you’re so fond of my pudding. Sounds like you had a great tutor.”

“She was extremely strict, but...now that you mention it...”

In a rare sight, Richard stared into the air like he was swimming through his

own memories. Maybe this wasn't just the reason he liked pudding in particular, but that this was the dessert that turned him into the Emperor of Sweets. What a truly sinful snack, if that was the case.

The sweet smell of caramel wafted about the kitchen. I was sure I'd be causing trouble for whoever actually needed to use the kitchen if I stayed too long. I should leave soon, but there was one more thing I wanted to talk to him about.

"Um, so, to be serious for a second, I understand it might not be possible now, but once things cool down a little, I think you should try to clear things up with them. It'd be awful to leave things like this."

"Of course. I wouldn't want to besmirch your good name."

"That's not what I mean. I know I'm in no position to say this, but—"

I hesitated for a moment after that preamble before continuing. "I mean, you already have someone you really care about like that, don't you?"

Now that the curse had been lifted, there was nothing to get in between them anymore.

Richard stared at me for a moment. The simmering pot made a burbling sound, and an impossibly gentle look filled his eyes. He let out a forced, callous chuckle.

"...This isn't something a child should be sticking his nose into."

"Stop calling me a child. You're not even ten years older than me."

"My age is a secret. I am a jeweler of unknown age."

"If someone fell in love with you once before, even if something happened, I don't think they'd be able to forget you. And I mean, four years... Sure, it's a long time, but I know if it were me—er, I guess that's a weird way to put it. Anyway, just call her at least."

"Seigi."

The future Earl of Claremont, who looked more like a corpse that had just risen from its grave than a man in his thirties, approached me in silence. Richard stepped between us, but I took a step back when I saw the pleading look in

Henry's eyes. He was looking at me with those blue eyes. The faint blue of a clear sky seemed to be the family color.

"....."

Henry stared at me for a moment before taking my hand and bowing deeply.

He didn't say a thing the whole time.

After what felt like ten seconds or so, Henry said something to Richard and quietly left the kitchen.

"...What was that about?"

"Good question. I haven't the faintest idea what he's thinking. More importantly, if you're done here, you ought to go back to your room. You probably never should have left."

"But I have to get these in the fridge."

"I will take full responsibility for finishing your puddings. Do not worry."

"Oh, okay, please do."

I felt a bit like I'd become a rare animal in a zoo. I'd been prepared to get the crap beaten out of me physically or be taken away in cuffs, but being completely unharmed was so unexpected, it hardly felt real. I quickly returned to my room on the second floor and decided to take a nap. If I was going to get back on a plane tomorrow, I needed to use the time I had now to get my strength back up.

Once the sun had set, a maid brought me my dinner—a slightly scorched piece of roast chicken, a hard roll, and a medicinal-looking soup with purple herbs scattered on top. I guess the English nobles of today were trying to be health-conscious. Or maybe they were just trying to be considerate, since I was still a little sick. It was going to be cold that night, so I borrowed some wool nightclothes once I finished bathing.

It was eight-thirty, and while it was very early to be going to sleep, I didn't have anything else to do. But just as I was about to get back into bed. I heard a strange sound. A piano, maybe. From the first floor.

The lyrical melody sounded almost like raindrops melting into the night air. It

made me wonder if they had an in-house pianist or something. I hadn't had a chance to take any pictures of the mansion, so I decided to go explore and see what it was.

I put my coat on over my pajamas and headed downstairs, following the sound of the piano. It led me to a little room that looked like a salon designed to receive about ten guests. Several one-and two-person seats were set about the room. The walls were covered in paintings and the fireplace was lit.

A man was at the yellowish-brown grand piano, playing it. It was Henry. And Richard was in one of the seats. They were both wearing dark-brown nightgowns.

I hid myself in the alcove of the bay window because I didn't want to be scolded for leaving my room. Thankfully, it had curtains. I wrapped them around myself for camouflage. If I was very careful, I was pretty sure they wouldn't notice me.

I peered out of the gap in the curtains to get a look at Henry's face. There was sweat on his brow, even though the music sounded like the waters of a swiftly flowing stream. I had to wonder what this one-on-one concert was about. Every note of the gentle melody seemed to weigh heavily on the soul.

The song ended gently, like a child drifting off to sleep, and Richard applauded. Henry, looking a bit surprised, bowed a few times before taking a seat some distance from where Richard sat. On the table was a set of short glasses and a bottle of alcohol. I guess they were enjoying a nightcap together or something.

There was a fair bit of space between their chairs, so they were speaking relatively loudly.

I didn't have any confidence in my listening comprehension, but I could understand the general tone of their conversation. Henry would mutter a few words, and Richard would listen warmly, replying in a tender tone before handing the conversation back to Henry. Henry would listen attentively to what Richard said, then respond with a handful of words, almost like a rock skipping over a lake. Richard would listen and politely respond.

I didn't know what I was looking at. Was this entertaining a guest or

babysitting? Not only was he Richard's older cousin, he was indirectly responsible for Richard's girlfriend breaking up with him. Shouldn't he have been the one trying to make it up to Richard if anything? No, wait. Thinking like that would make me no different from the relatives Jeffrey was angry with for backing Henry into a corner.

He was a victim, just like Richard. He'd been thrown into the middle of a vortex of unforeseeable trouble.

If nothing else, the unparalleled kindness Richard was showing him suggested he felt much the same way. I remembered Jeffrey implying something about this quality of Richard's contributing to the stress on Henry, but I had my doubts. Also, where *was* Jeffrey?

While I was pondering aimlessly, I heard a very easy word to understand. Henry said "Japanese." Was he talking about me? No. The language.

Henry was telling Richard that he wished he could have learned it with them too when he was little. Richard smiled and made some kind of gentle suggestion that they could do something new together from now on. He was in his invincible Jeweler Richard mode. Now it made sense—this was probably how he intended to make up with him. Though, Richard seemed to be the one making all the concessions. I knew I wouldn't be able to let bygones be bygones without at least a more sincere "I'm sorry" from Henry.

No, no—Richard had literally *just* scolded me for getting indignant on his behalf. I had to get over it. I mean, they were family—big showy apology or not, they'd still have to see each other again. I'm sure Richard was trying to find a way to bury the hatchet. It made logical sense, but emotionally, it was hard to wrap my head around.

But there was no point in the eavesdropper getting upset for no real reason. I considered withdrawing to my room, since the concert was over, but Jeffrey walked right past me, holding a tray. He was still in the same clothes he had on this afternoon. And the tray held four rose-patterned cups. It was pudding. *My* pudding. I'd told him I was making that for Richard, too.

Jeffrey called Henry "Harry." I guess it was a nickname. He announced that they had Japanese treats and should all enjoy them together. The tone of his

voice reminded me of a teacher leading students on a field trip. Come to think of it, Jeffrey had been energetic and almost overbearingly cheerful when I first met him...but maybe he'd learned to be like that to make up for how timid his brother was.

I peered into the room again and saw Jeffrey had taken a seat between Henry and Richard. The three of them looked calm, like they were getting along just fine, as they silently ate their pudding. It seemed a little surreal after all that had happened, but it was a sweet image.

It was probably a scene that had played out almost daily in this very mansion twenty years ago.

After a long stretch of silence, Henry was the first to speak.

"Good," he said.

There was no way I misheard that. He thought my pudding was good. Jeffrey echoed the sentiment. Was it really that good? Was the lazy baby-food pudding Hiromi always made me really fit for English nobles? I started to wonder if there was something wrong with the people of this country's taste buds, but stopped myself—I should just be happy that they liked it and were enjoying it. Even if I did specifically make it for *Richard*.

As Henry and Jeffrey kept extolling the virtues of the snack, Richard sternly announced—enunciating every syllable:

These were for me, and I didn't want to share them with you.

I didn't want to let you have even a bite.

I really didn't.

I didn't want to share with you anymore.

The air in the room went cold. Jeffrey let out an "oh," and Henry looked like he might cry. Jeffrey said something in a bright tone, seemingly trying to justify himself. He was probably saying that he was the one who grabbed them without asking, so it was all his fault. But Richard abruptly interrupted his monologue.

But I've already had the opportunity to enjoy this hundreds of times.

So, I guess I can share it with you this once.

You ought to appreciate it.

The excessive precision of his proclamation made it clear even to me as I was eavesdropping that it was meant as a joke. But Jeffrey and Henry seemed to have trouble taking it as such. The silence continued. Jeffrey, presumably unable to stand it any longer, was about to say something with that sad look on his face, but Richard interrupted with a short comment. At that point, the other two men burst out in raucous laughter. He'd probably told them it was a joke, but I couldn't be sure.

Richard got up from his seat, and I hurried to hide myself in the curtain again. If he came out of the room, he'd be walking right past me. *You are a wall*, I reminded myself. *You are a curtain. You are an inanimate object.*

Richard passed right in front of me. I sensed someone pursuing him, asking him to wait, as I remained wrapped up like a cocoon in the curtains. It was Henry. I don't know why he had to stop right in front of me, of all places. I worried that I'd been spotted, but they continued talking like normal.

Henry's voice cracked. He was already on the verge of tears. An English listening comprehension practice session about three skill levels above mine was being presented at point-blank range in front of me. I couldn't follow the faster-paced first half, but I did understand the last bit when he slowed down. I heard the word "Japanese" again. This time it was about me.

Do you really love that Japanese man?

He's just a friend, isn't he? An astute observation.

Henry braced himself with a hand on the wall as he tried to persuade Richard to try to pick things up with the woman he'd been dating before. I felt embarrassed to have hoped for even a second that he'd give Richard a more direct apology. In the four years since Richard left England, this man had been tormented by the same thought the entire time. Something so awful that the thought physically destroyed him. I could feel the unease—like an icy hand caressing your heart—infecting me, too. *But also, please, I'm begging you two, don't look down. I'm pretty sure my slippers are sticking out!*

Richard remained silent, listening to his cousin's laments, before letting out a sigh and smiling. I couldn't actually see his face, but I could see it in my mind. Surely, he was wearing his gentle jeweler's face—the same one he made to put my mind at ease.

Richard slowly explained that it was four years ago, and that four years for a man and four years for a woman are very different. He went on to explain that while he had been estranged from his family, he hadn't cut contact with her. His older cousin took a step closer, and Richard slowly told him, in a way that even a small child could understand, that she was married and the mother of two wonderful children. He thought she was very happy.

It sounded almost like a death sentence to me.

Richard offered Henry his shoulder for support, since Henry really did seem like he was about to collapse.

"It's over. At least, it has been for me. All I want now is to see you happy and healthy again. Why don't you play for me again sometime?"

The weird thing was that his words sounded like Japanese to me. Maybe it was just that his voice was so similar in either language, my brain was translating automatically or something. That didn't really make a lot of sense... but I *did* understand what he'd said.

I couldn't understand anything after that. The topic changed, they went back up to typical native-speaker speed, and it all became a mystery to me again.

The two of them slowly walked off together.

I poked my head out from the curtains and surveyed the area. Richard and Henry were gone. Only Jeffrey was left, drinking by himself. Now was my chance to escape. I moved as quickly as I could over the carpet without making a sound and hurried up the stairs, making sure not to slip.

I decided to go to sleep. I had zero faith in my English skills and wasn't confident I'd understood what Richard said correctly. Maybe I misheard. Plus, it's not like it was even possible for your heart to directly translate someone's speech for you like that. I should just head back to my room and go to bed.

But when I opened the door—

“You’re late.”

Richard was already there. The beautiful man lay on the chaise lounge, an irritated look on his face, looking up at the ceiling in front of the shut curtains.

“...Why are you in here?”

“No reason, really. I just wanted to check on you.”

“Oh, right...”

“At least, that’s my official story. I just wanted to be alone for a bit. You know, you could have joined us instead of just standing in the doorway like that. You could have had a taste of the delightful hell I was just in.”

“Whoa, you noticed?”

“Of course I did.”

Richard sighed and closed his eyes. I didn’t think he actually intended to sleep here, but my room was probably something of a refuge for him. That little meeting must have really worn him out.

I asked him if he wanted one of the blankets from the bed, and Richard laughed and asked why.

“You might catch a cold. It’s chilly in here.”

“Well, it is an old mansion. I know it’s not the most comfortable place to stay. Would you like to switch rooms? Admittedly, I don’t think any of the others are much better.”

“...I don’t really mind it. I guess I just wanted to be sure you were okay.”

“In what respect?”

“I mean, this used to be your room, right?”

Richard listlessly glanced back at my face. He didn’t seem to want to know how I figured it out, but it had been obvious to me when I noticed the bookshelf attached to the writing desk was full of well-used Japanese, Korean, and Chinese dictionaries and books in other languages I couldn’t read. It was a child’s room that didn’t really feel like one.

Richard just looked at me in silence for a bit before turning around toward the

window. He started talking while I couldn't see his face.

"Now I'm curious about your childhood bedroom. Tell me about it—anything about it would be fine while I try to sober up."

"Did you really drink that much?"

He didn't respond. I guess he wanted this to be a fair trade. But what could I tell him about my room? I didn't even have a room of my own in our tiny apartment in Machida. Actually, no, wait—I did have another home.

"...Well, let me see. I guess if you want to know about my home in Saitama, I do remember it a little. It had a corridor that ran all the way around the outside, and when the sun was really bright, all the dust in the air looked like clouds of silver. I remember being fascinated by that. And as far as my room goes...I probably had one, but I don't really remember."

"Saitama? Wasn't your home in Machida?"

"My first home was in Oomiya. You've just forgotten. It was my father's house. But, well, he was an awful person, so Hiromi and I ran away. And that was that."

I wondered if Jeffrey had looked into him, too. If he had, well, good for him. After he lost his punching bag, he'd remarried. Apparently, they were divorced already. I may have been related to him by blood, but the only person I thought of as my father was my stepdad, Mr. Nakata, not him. Whenever I thought about my biological dad, I felt a surge of darkness fill my stomach and awful memories flash through my mind.

"That was around when I started calling Hiromi by her first name. Calling her Mom just felt...kind of immature, I guess, and I didn't like it. I wanted to think of us more like, I'm Seigi, and she's Hiromi, and we're in this together. But thinking about it now, I guess that's little-kid logic for you, huh? I mean, honestly, she's done more for me than I can even imagine."

I let out a bitter little chuckle and stopped there. Richard turned to avoid my gaze and got up. He walked over to a small cabinet next to the writing desk and opened the door. Several card-shaped objects had been haphazardly shoved inside. He picked up one of them, turned it right side up, and handed it to me.

I wasn't sure what it was, and I couldn't see very well in the dark. I leaned over to look at it in the light and realized it was a family photo. Maybe it was in black-and-white just because of the photographer's taste. I mean, Richard was in the picture, looking the same way he did now, so it had to be pretty recent but—huh?

“Huh?”

The subject had long hair falling in gentle golden waves down to the hips. A reserved yet brilliant smile and a tiny waist. Sleek black high heels and a wrap skirt.

“Wait, what's this?! You in drag? No, wait, a woman? Um...?”

“That's my mother.”

Oh, right, that made sense. On second look, there was a little boy in shorts standing in front of her, with a stern expression and big puffy cheeks. I could see hints of Richard's features in his face.

“Talk about winning the genetic lottery...”

“You're saying strange things again. That's Catherine de Vulpian. She wouldn't let me call her Maman because she thought it made it sound like she was married. If I dropped her surname when I introduced myself, she would cry, saying, ‘Do you hate your poor maman?’ She was not the easiest woman to be around.”

“Wait, sound like she was married? Wasn't she actually married?”

“My parents had already divorced at that point, so she was single at the time.”

“Man, everyone in your family sure is a lot.”

“Funny hearing that from you.”

After that, we talked about all sorts of things. Like things we liked doing when we were kids. I told Richard about going over to my friends' places to play. Richard told me about his language studies. We talked about the things that scared us—for me, it was my family members' tears, and for Richard, it was the mirror. What did we each want to eat most right now? Ramen for me. Richard

wanted a not-too-sweet cheesecake. Where would we go first on a trip around the world? I said Sri Lanka. I mean, that was where Grandma's sapphire came from, after all. Richard said Japan. I guess once everything was settled here, he'd be more at ease in Japan than at home.

We could have kept talking for ages, but Richard suddenly checked the clock on the wall. I ended up doing the same. It was already just about eleven-thirty. Time had flown by. It had been barely nine when we started.

"I seem to have overstayed my welcome. Thank you for indulging me. You have a nonstop twelve-hour flight from the airport tomorrow morning, though the tailwind should make it a little shorter. Please rest up tonight."

"You got it. Sorry for making you look after me this whole time. I'm really sorry," I bowed my head again, and Richard just ignored me. I guess his "don't apologize" order was still in effect.

Fine. Then I'll put it another way.

"...Thank you. The fact that I can still talk to you while you're right here in front of me makes me so happy, I can't even believe it. I really was prepared to never see you again."

My smile was strained. Richard turned around as he was about to leave the room and looked me right in the eye. What was it?

"I have some concerns."

"What?"

"I told you to take better care of yourself, but I'm not sure I actually got through to you. I have no confidence you won't do something rash again."

Anxious creases formed under Richard's eyes.

"I don't think I'm going to have another opportunity to try to smash someone's family treasure."

"That's not what I mean. But as they say, what happens twice will happen a third time."

"...Wait, are you going to go off alone again after all?"

“You really think I’m going to go wandering around for no reason? As if I have the time for that. Furthermore, it seems you have no faith in me whatsoever.”

“O-of course not!”

“Trust me, it’s mutual. Give me your hand.”

Richard casually stuck his hand into his pocket and placed something in my hand. It was something in a velvet drawstring pouch.

Wait. Something about the size felt familiar in my palm.

I had a bad feeling.

I opened the bag, and a clear, faceted gem appeared. It was none other than the white sapphire I’d thrown across the room. I checked it over and it really didn’t have any cracks. It was a stone with a delicate yet heavy translucence to it.

“While a certain somebody’s reckless throw caused a bit of damage to it, there are no visible cracks. It’ll shine right back up if you have my mentor get it polished for you.” Richard bowed his head. “Please, let me pay for that service,” he added, voice full of gusto and a faint smile on his face. “It’s a gift.”

“Huh?”

“For you,” Richard said, pointing at the white sapphire. A stone as perfectly clear as water from freshly melted snow. “There was an addendum to the hidden will among the earl’s letters. If a member of the Claremont family somehow discovers the truth about the stone and comes to a mutually satisfactory agreement with the trustee, that person may take the stone. Which means the stone is mine.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Then why are you giving it to me? And are you really sure about all that, in the first place? I mean, you only just found out that it wasn’t a diamond today.”

“If you’re concerned about my other relatives being informed, Jeffrey was happy to take on the task. That said, I ought to clarify something. I did call it a gift, but I’m really just giving it to you for safekeeping.”

Safekeeping? Me? Why would you give a college student without even a

single safe deposit box to his name—let alone a whole safe room—something like this for safekeeping? Richard continued talking while I sat there, baffled.

“There’s too much history behind this stone. The thought of leaving it in this house makes me uneasy, but it doesn’t feel right to sell it either. So, I’ve decided to give it to you to take care of for the time being. That way, this white sapphire won’t simply be a stone of ill fortune that toyed with my life and the lives of my family members—it will become a stone you saved from the fog of its curse. The stone itself is without sin, but human perception can be quite troublesome. Consider yourself tasked with exorcizing the stone. But do not forget that you are ultimately only holding on to it for me—you will return it eventually.”

It was all very complicated, but it sounded like he wasn’t really giving it to me, despite calling it a gift. I was just “holding on to it.” And I was to change or supplement its properties somehow—like he wanted me to add another layer of wrapping paper over an old, worn-out one.

“Are you sure I’m the one for this job?”

“It has to be you.”

Something about that sounded familiar. I thought back to the secret Mr. Homura told me. The thing Richard had told him and asked him not to share with me. I knew it was pretty late to be wondering about it, but I wanted to know why. The jeweler looked at me, puzzled, and I began talking.

“I guess I can’t help but wonder why you did so much for me when I’m just a worthless part-timer. I mean, I know why you hired me to begin with, but...it’s been kind of a long time. I guess it’s just sort of hard to believe.”

“Where is this coming from now? I think it goes without saying that it’s *because* you were such a worthless part-timer.”

Huh? What did that mean? I blinked a few times, and Richard laid into me with a composed expression.

“Because I did not believe that anyone in *any* field would ever hire someone as careless as you. You become far too invested in every single client, and you act rashly without any consideration for yourself. To top it all off, you’ve even

risked your own life for a complete stranger. You're like a boulder rolling down a hill, and I have no idea where you might end up if left to your own devices."

Richard said in a clear voice that he simply couldn't leave me be. I knew this wasn't coming from a place of love, romantic or otherwise. He was basically saying that he'd looked after me for so long because he thought I was a danger to myself, or something like that. I wanted to throw everything after "too invested in every single client" right back in his face, but now probably wasn't the time.

I put on an awkward smile. Richard still had that haughty expression on his face. He knew exactly what he was doing.

"...Fine. But how long am I supposed to keep it for?"

"Well, it is a stone that was bound by that awful will for a terribly long time. I imagine it will take a similarly long time for the ill will that's suffusing it to abate." Richard cocked his head to the side. "I know."

His last few gestures seemed to have an extremely theatrical quality to them for some reason.

"Why don't you return it the last time you and I see each other?"

"Huh?"

Was he really going to keep saying such ominous things at this point? I got up off the bed, saying I wasn't going to let him off easy if he was going to start spouting that nonsense again, but Richard reached out and pointed at me to stop me in my tracks.

"The 'when' doesn't matter. You have something very important to me in your possession, so as long as I remain somewhere on this Earth, whether you become a civil servant or a mafia boss, whether you get married or fall ill—you must, without fail, contact me. Of course, how many decades in the future the last time might be, I have no way of knowing."

It was a strange feeling. Richard's voice felt less like sound and more like a physical sensation against my skin. The heat of his words soaked into me, like the water of a hot spring splashing flowing against my skin. I froze in place, and Richard smiled like he was having the time of his life. I was surprised he had it in

him to make such a boyish expression.

Richard cemented his victory in our argument about whether I'd accept it or not with the almost violent power of his beauty. Before I knew it, he'd walked over to me, and the bag with the sapphire in it was thrust into my pajama pocket.

"Richard..."

"I don't accept returns. I gave you that stone for safekeeping. And I expect you to take proper care of it. I will prepare a box for it by tomorrow morning. And I've arranged for admittedly hasty documents to get you through customs swiftly even if they stop you. Be sure to keep it on your person."

"Wait."

I hurried to stop Richard before he left the room. I walked around the bed and dug through my bag on the chair, finding what I was looking for immediately.

I walked up to Richard, carrying a small box, and held out my right hand.

"You can have it."

I was sure Richard knew what was in it before he opened it. I mean, of course he did. It was the jewelry box he gave me at Étranger. It was my grandma's ring.

After confirming the box's contents, he shook his head.

"I don't understand. I can't accept this. This is your grandmother's ring."

I added that even though I'd said he could have it, I meant I wanted him to hold on to it for me. Richard made a bit of a weird face. *You just did the same thing to me!*

"It's not fair that I'm the only one taking care of something. I want you to hold on to that for me, too. You can give it back to me when I return the sapphire to you."

"But surely this ring means something to your mother, too?"

"Hiromi told me I could do whatever I wanted with it. And I want to give it to you."

Richard went quiet and gently pulled the ring from the box. My

grandmother's ring sparkled at the end of his slender finger, catching the light in the room. It was so beautiful that it didn't look real—not the stone and not Richard.

"This padparadscha truly is enchanting, no matter how many times I see it. It's clear and pure and of such vivid color, despite being untreated. Almost like a lotus growing in the mud, yet remaining unsullied."

"I wish my grandma could have heard that."

I mumbled, and Richard looked at me. He smiled warmly.

"Very well. On my honor as a jeweler—no, as an individual, I will take this ring wholeheartedly under my care. The next time you feel like recklessly crashing into a situation to be a knight in shining armor, gaze at my white sapphire in place of this ring. And remember what we talked about today. Make sure you take it to heart."

"I think the gist of it was 'be happy,' right? I'll never forget it as long as I live. But it won't mean much if it's just me. You better pursue enough happiness to make up for all the trouble you've been dragged into so far. And if you're ever struggling with anything, I want you to look at my grandma's...no, I want you to look at *my* ring. You said this padparadscha reminded you of a beautiful lotus, right? Well, I'm sure it'll cheer you right up."

"You might be right. Well, I think we have ourselves a deal."

I was so happy. My heart welled up with joy. Was this really what it felt like to give someone you care about something you treasured so deeply it was almost a part of you and have them accept it? It was. I had offered up part of my heart to be adopted. It made me happy, but it was also kind of sad. Even if I knew it would come back to me someday.

Oh, actually.

"What is it?"

"Oh, uh, I guess I just thought it was kind of funny. It's almost like we exchanged rings."

I froze about two seconds after I said it.

Crap. Why did I always let stuff like that slip out of my mouth before realizing my mistake? And why did I have to go *there* after all the trouble the topic of marriage had caused Richard? What was wrong with me? This was beyond insensitive.

As I struggled to think of a way to apologize, trembling in fear that he'd tell me to jump out the window, Richard's expression changed without a sound. He was smiling. With his threateningly beautiful face. Oh, no.

"I'm sorry, Richard. Really. I can't believe I did that again."

"Why are you apologizing? It's not even 'almost' like anything— isn't that exactly what we just did?"

"Huh?"

"As you well know, you and I have gone out to eat together numerous times, I comforted you in my car while you were crying, and even got into bed with you in a hotel room, right? It's the logical next step."

"Uh, um? Look, that was just, you know—to fool your enemy you must first fool your friends—"

"What a cruel thing to say. It's almost as if you don't even like me."

"I never said that! Would someone who didn't even like you chase you halfway around the world?! No, look, come on, I'm sorry. I swear on my life I'll be more careful from now on, so please just—"

"Stop talking."

"Yes, sir."

I shut my mouth and straightened up, and Richard touched my cheek with his hand. At least, I think it was his hand. It was probably his hand. His blond hair tickled my ear and then pulled away again.

"Good night, Mr. Seigi Nakata."

Richard smiled like a flower in full bloom and told me to sleep well. I hated how beautiful he looked when he flashed me his "gotcha" face just as he left. Drunks aren't supposed to look like they're having that much fun. He really was beautiful, nonetheless...though maybe that was just the look people got when a

heavy weight was lifted from their shoulders.

When I heard the door shut, I let out a deep sigh.

I was sure I wouldn't be able to get to sleep for at least another thirty minutes, no matter how hard I tried, so I gave up and started messing with my phone. There was only one person I wanted to talk to right now—the angel who gave me the push I needed.

“Good evening. I’m in England right now. It’s night here. It’s a long story, but the short version is that I should be home safe soon. Thank you so much. I have so many things I want to talk to you about!”

She didn't reply, but that was fine. I'd see her again when I got home. It should be morning over there. I wondered what Tanimoto was doing.

It finally hit me that I was going to be able to safely return to my normal routine. I let out an extraordinarily long sigh. The swamp of sleep beckoned to me.

Honestly, I was pretty sure that what touched my cheek earlier wasn't his hand. But I decided to pretend that it was. I didn't think my heart could take the alternative.

On my way into the country, I'd taken the subway from Heathrow to London. The trip back, however, was all driving by endless pastures by car before hitting traffic and then eventually arriving at the airport. It was eight in the morning. My flight was to depart at nine-thirty. The driver waited outside while Richard came with me into the departures lobby.

After going through all the annoying formalities and checking my backpack, I stood in front of the gate to departures, where Richard said to me, as if it were nothing important, “I won't be able to leave the country for a while, until I finish sorting out this inheritance nonsense. Would you mind assisting my mentor in Ginza until then?”

For a while. Until then. Which meant.

“Then you're—!”

“I will be returning to Ginza once I free myself from this mire.”

I shouted, “Hooray!” attracting the attention of everyone in the airport, and ended up shrinking with embarrassment mid-fist pump. But I was so happy. Embarrassed, but happy.

Because Richard was coming back.

“Enough shouting. Now, what’s your answer? Is that a yes?”

“Yes! Yes! Absolutely yes!”

“Once is more than enough!”

I heard someone whistle off in the distance. I didn’t know what it meant exactly, but it sounded positive. I felt so happy. Thank you. Thank you so much.

“Leave it to me! Between Mr. Ranasinghe and me, the shop’ll be so sparkling clean when you get back, it’ll knock your socks off!”

“Don’t you forget your duties as a student. My mentor’s a businessman first, after all—if he realizes you’ll do unpaid labor, he’ll take full advantage and work you to the bone. He’s got a mean streak, too.”

That last bit almost sounded like he was talking to himself. But, I mean, how many chores could he even make me do in that shop? I wasn’t scared in the slightest.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I only talked to him for a little bit, but he can’t be that bad.”

“Oh, you sweet summer child. He is extremely talented at making himself *look* nice when he needs to. By the time you realize it’s an act, it’ll be too late.”

Sounded like they’d been through a lot together. I didn’t know when Richard would be back, but I could at least get to know Saul better and ask him to tell me about how Richard had been back then.

Richard must have been suspicious of the big grin that was still on my face. “If you’re that interested in gemstones, why don’t you have him show you the ropes? It’ll be brutal, but he has a much longer teaching career than I do.”

“I do like gems, but I’m mostly just happy that you’ll be coming back. Oh,

yeah, I've been thinking about this all night—I've decided I'm going to study conversational English. My school's known for their courses in that department."

Two ninety-minute sessions a week with a tuition fee of 4,000 yen. A maximum of three students per native English-speaking instructor. It was a super-intensive English conversation course. A friend of mine in the literature department had mentioned he was jealous of the fact that it wasn't a required class for economics majors. That said, I heard it was popular among the students who really wanted to learn to speak English, since it was both cheaper and more efficient than full-on English classes.

"It didn't really hit me until now, but I've only ever talked to you in Japanese. It doesn't really feel fair to force you to compromise for me like that all the time."

Richard furrowed his brow for a moment but then let out a mildly frustrated sigh. What was his problem? I finally found the motivation to study.

"I'm just a little astonished. You want to learn another language specifically to talk to a particular person, yet you deliberately go to someone else—and pay them—to learn it? It's like wanting to go to Liverpool from London and deciding to find a boat to row your way there."

The casual English pronunciation of the announcement over the loudspeakers went in one ear and out the other. Richard kept his head turned away from me standoffishly, gazing into the distance. It was going to take some time before I could understand the words.

"...But you're busy, aren't you? I probably wouldn't even be able to get you on the phone."

"Circumstances may be keeping me away from Étranger, but an occasional phone call should be doable. Assuming it's a once-or maybe twice-a-week occasion."

"Yeah, but it'd be like talking to a preschooler at the level I'm at right now..."

"How insulting. The average English-speaking five-year-old is better than you. Are you sure you don't want to talk to me to enjoy a conversation with

someone who speaks beautiful Japanese?”

Richard’s Japanese sounded unusually stilted. His overly formal choice of words was very typical of him, but surely there was a slightly gentler way he could’ve put that? But I knew what he meant. He was probably a little embarrassed, but we’d have to get used to it. If neither of us grew more comfortable with the other, we’d be forever walking in circles past each other’s front doors.

To put it more plainly, I wanted to improve my English because I wanted to get to know him better. I wanted to be able to talk to him on his home turf. And that was why Richard suggested I take a more direct approach. It was so embarrassing, but I was glad for it. Since he’d offered, I’d better try my best.

“Okay. I’ll call you. Ooh, this is kind of embarrassing.”

“What’s there to be embarrassed about? You’re not making any sense. Text me first, though. I’ll give you a time frame when I’m available, and you can pick a time to call. I’ll send you a topic in advance and you can prepare a three-minute talk on it by our next appointment. Let’s start with a self-introduction.”

“Uhh...”

“If you’re going to do something, you might as well do it right. Your speech will be hardly recognizable in two months, I guarantee it.”

I’d forgotten he was a language-learning fiend. I hadn’t even considered how terrifying it might be to be taught by someone who’d gotten this proficient in foreign languages just because he liked them. Well, maybe I had it all backward. I did learn a lot about gemstones through pure osmosis, so maybe this insanity would help me with the English I needed to study for the civil service exam, too. Even if it was sure to be a demonically brutal course.

“Is there something you’re not satisfied with?”

“Nope! Nothing at all!”

“It certainly doesn’t look that way. Come on, out with it.”

“There really isn’t anything. Just the fact that I can talk to you on the phone feels like a miracle to me. I mean, if I can contact you, that means no matter

where you are in the world, I can know you're doing well. It makes me so happy, I don't think I'll be able to put my phone down.

"...There's always someone better than even the best. There's always someone better than even the best. There's always someone better than even the best..."

"Is that some kind of spell?" Richard frowned a bit, then mumbled, "Never mind," under his breath. *Well, fine, then.*

"Just make sure you come back to Ginza. I want to introduce you to Tanimoto. I think you'll get along! You both love stones, after all. I'm sure you'll be able to get into all sorts of conversations I won't have a chance of following."

I laughed, and Richard went silent for a bit, before smiling like he suddenly remembered something.

"Are you sure about that?"

"...About what?"

"Now, I'm just expressing what seems to be the general consensus, but as you well know, I am highly proficient in both Japanese and gemology, I have reasonably good looks, and most of all, I'm in rather high spirits now that I've been freed from my obligations and become a carefree bachelor. Are you sure you want to do that? What if the two of us grow close and leave you by the wayside?"

Richard cocked his head to the side. His seductive gaze was dripping with allure. I never knew he was such a ladykiller. I guess it wasn't like I hadn't considered it at all.

"It wouldn't bother me either way."

"Aren't we confident. Are you that certain of her affections?"

I didn't think Richard would get it if I told him that it was the other way around.

"I'm sure of one thing: It's *literally impossible* for you to like Tanimoto more than me!" I declared, confidently putting my hands on my hips.

People were free to fall in love with whoever they pleased. It's not something

anyone should stand in the way of. But even if, hypothetically, Richard fell in love with Tanimoto...no matter how deep and wonderful that love might be, I wasn't about to let him best me in terms of feelings for her. He didn't stand a chance. Plus, she was my genuine angel, and she'd even told me that as long as I was looking out for her, she'd try to give love a chance despite not understanding it. Of course, this was also where she mentioned that she'd tell me if she got a boyfriend and we kind of got our wires painfully crossed, but maybe there was a chance we could grow past that and—wait.

Richard had a weird look on his face. He had a frown on his lips, and his blue eyes were open wide.

I didn't know what was wrong. I didn't know what I'd done, but I knew from experience that if I just ignored it, I'd be in danger. Swift action leads to victory!

"Hey, uh, Richard, did I say something weird again?"

"Not really," Richard said without taking his eyes off me. He showed no sign of wanting to explain. I guess he wanted me to figure it out on my own. I went over my own words in my head as Richard stared at me. "It's literally impossible for you to like Tanimoto more than me"—something was wrong in there. Was it the "literally impossible" part? I felt like I was breaking down parts of speech in English class. It's literally impossible for *you* to *like* Tanimoto *more than me*—oh. Ohhhh. I got it. Even I understood what I did now. I wished I didn't though.

"Y-you know what I meant!"

"Japanese is a rather difficult language, isn't it?"

"You know I wasn't trying to say that *I'm* the one you like!"

Richard cut me off, grabbed me by the shoulders, spun me around to face the gates, and gave me a smack on the back.

"Well, unfortunately, at the moment I can't exactly deny that."

Richard chuckled and told me to get going already. I did as I was told and started walking. Even after I showed my passport and ticket and went through the departure gate, Richard was still watching me go. I waved to him.

It was a pleasant goodbye this time. Because I knew it wouldn't be our last.

The most handsome man in the world looked a bit exasperated at that simple wave of my hand. But he waved back to me.

I didn't know how long I'd be gone, so I just asked Shimomura from my prep class to take notes for me. When I took the time to do the math, it turned out I'd spent two days traveling and two days in England, for a total of four days. And one of those days was a holiday. Maybe I hadn't needed to go to all that much trouble to cover all my bases, after all. I still needed to get in contact with him, though, and the sooner the better.

I pulled out my phone on a bench outside the duty-free shop. Thank goodness for free airport Wi-Fi.

"That too-complicated-to-explain issue got resolved, and I should be home soon. Sorry for worrying you."

I didn't expect to get a response. But Shimomura responded almost instantly. It was only one line.

"Weren't you having the time of your life over there?"

What was he talking about?

Before I could ask, Shimomura sent another reply with a URL. It looked like some kind of photo-centric social media site. It didn't seem dangerous to click. When I followed the link and my screen changed, I let out a shriek like a cat who'd just been stepped on.

A selfie of me and Jeffrey in front of the Tower of London.

A selfie of me and Jeffrey in front of Big Ben.

A candid shot of me and Jeffrey in front of the British Museum.

And through it all, I had a sour look on my face, while Jeffrey wore a sparkling smile.

Wha—what? How? Why did Shimomura have Richard's cousin's social media account? Though now that I looked...Jeffrey's account had tens of thousands of followers. I guess he was famous? He was pretty handsome, after all.

“He’s some finance personality. I followed him because he seemed flashy.

“Were you living it up in London with your rich friend? I’ll take some duty-free alcohol for the trouble.”

What else could I do but reply, “Sure thing!”

I prayed that he wouldn’t tell the other people in my class, but didn’t think my chances were good. I doubted he’d understand even if I tried to explain, and honestly, his misunderstanding was probably for the best. I went and bought Shimomura his alcohol and headed to my boarding gate.

I hadn’t noticed when he handed me my ticket, but I was in business class again, like it was only natural. I wouldn’t be able to raise my head to Richard for a while after this.

The flight attendants served drinks before takeoff. I figured I might as well, so I ordered a glass of the champagne the older man seated next to me was having.

The flight attendant responded with a smile when I tried to say, “I’ll have what he’s having,” in English, but a glass of plain water appeared before me and my dreams of champagne vanished like so many bubbles.

A glass of water.

You know, it was kind of funny. It looked almost like the white sapphire tucked away in my pocket—the gem that was like clear snowmelt from the Alps hardened into a stone. It was indisputably beautiful, and originally a testimony to familial love, even if the way it was used later was horrible.

I started to daydream. What if the earl hadn’t been surrounded by such prejudiced people? What if the earl hadn’t been driven to revenge by hatred?

It would have changed Richard’s life. He wouldn’t have had to run away—he might be living in America right now with his Turkish wife, working in finance. My life would be different, too. I’d be going to school with Grandma’s ring still hidden in my fridge, visiting home every once in a while. I would have never met the original owner of that ring. And I never would have experienced the thrill of tossing an English earl’s family treasure across the room, or learned how to make royal milk tea.

I knew I shouldn't think about things like this...

...but whatever it was that made the universe bring me and Richard together, I was grateful for it.

I gently pressed the outside of my bag's pocket to feel the sapphire inside.

I messed with my phone a bit more to kill time before I had to put it in airplane mode. My hand slipped, putting me back on Jeffrey's social media page. It had updated. With one single picture. It was a picture of the vast green fields of the Claremont estate. The clouds in the sky in the photo were the same color as the ones I could see through my window on the plane.

There was a short comment in English with the photo.

"Love or money? My family chooses people who choose love. They make me proud."

I felt like my prospects of ever getting along with this person were completely and utterly hopeless. It would be impossible. I was pretty sure I'd want to run at the sight of his smile. I decided that when I texted Richard when I got home, after thanking him for the trip and apologizing again, I'd ask him to ask Jeffrey to take those pictures of me down. That's what I was going to do. I put my phone in airplane mode, and the plane began to move. I hurriedly gulped down my water, worried it might spill. This whole trip really felt like a dream. Richard had called it a nightmare, but I don't think it was really that bad.

I felt the cold water flow deep into my body, almost like it was telling me it was time to wake up to my new reality.

I debated getting Shimomura a bottle of scotch or whiskey as a gift, but I figured given the occasion, I should go with gin. A bottle of Bombay Sapphire—a famous English brand—seemed perfectly fitting for the trip.

Extra Case: The Bicolor Tourmaline Tease

NINE-THIRTY, Saturday morning. Richard was in the shop in Ginza.

“Good morning, Seigi. You’re rather early,” Richard said over his shoulder as if it was nothing special.

My face immediately started to cycle through a variety of expressions—starting with a frown before inverting it. The streets of Ginza were quiet at 9 a.m. But of course they were—I mean, even *Étranger* didn’t open until 11, after all! I could have come in at 10 and had plenty of time to spare. But today was special.

Because Saul had told me that Richard was back today.

The beautiful jeweler was dressed in a fine suit, as he always was. It was made of a bulkier charcoal grey fabric, and the shirt underneath was a pale green. They were decidedly winter clothes.

“...Where’s Mr. Ranasinghe?”

“He was here earlier, but he left to take a phone call and hasn’t returned yet. I’m sure he’ll be back at any moment, but...”

Richard cut himself off mid-sentence and looked at me expectantly before averting his eyes again. I was pretty sure I knew what he wanted to say.

I followed Richard into the kitchen. He brought his bag along with him. I opened the part of the cabinet that held the teapot and saucepan, revealing a stock of tea tins. The stuff Saul had brought in had the same packaging as Richard’s tea, but their contents were totally different—he’d added his own personal spice blend to the tea.

I indicated the tea tins to Richard. He nodded without saying a word, and after he confirmed their contents, he promptly stowed them away in his bag. He pulled a set of identical tins out of the bag and replaced them as if nothing had changed. I almost burst out laughing when I saw how collected he was as

he exchanged the tins.

I understood how he felt, though. As someone who'd been drinking it the entire time Richard was away, I'd describe Saul's favorite blend of Dimbula-based tea as less tea and more health drink. It was full of Asian spices and flavors, invigorating and good for digestion, but didn't really fit the vibe of a quiet, relaxing shop. It was more the sort of thing that made you wanna run laps around the imperial palace grounds. I checked with Saul repeatedly to make sure it didn't have anything weird in it, and he would always assure me that there wasn't, but I still had my doubts. Especially since I was the one serving it to customers.

"Mission complete." I gave Richard a thumbs-up, and he smiled faintly at me. Ahh, seeing that smile in the shop made me impossibly happy.

"So, tell me, how was it working with my mentor while I was away?"

"Incredible. Sales were through the roof."

"That's Saul for you..."

The jewelers at this one-man shop, *Étranger*, were akin to the centers of their own little universes. If Richard was the type to deliver the stars that came into his orbit to customers with sincerity and the utmost care, Saul was more of a pitcher, throwing stars into space. I think *Étranger*'s customers looked forward to spending some soothing time with Richard, and I think he went to great pains to maintain that kind of atmosphere, but with Saul, the conversation always came back to numbers in the end. "How much do you think this costs?" "How much are you willing to pay?" That sort of thing. He was the type of person who enjoyed haggling with customers. Depending on how the negotiation went, he might lower the price, throw in some kind of freebie, or offer a bulk discount or a loyalty discount. He really was a salesman at heart. Maybe the heavily spiced tea was necessary to keep up the energy to haggle that hard every day.

Richard looked almost bizarrely at home. It was like he had never left. I wanted to say something a little sentimental, like "Welcome home," or "I'm so happy to see you again," or "I've been looking at your sapphire every day," but I'd completely lost the opportunity to. I was so happy, I couldn't sleep last night, but I was pretty tired today as a result and didn't have the energy now when it

mattered. That said, I did bring along what I needed to for today.

“What is that bag? Did Saul make you go buy some cleaning supplies or something?”

“Something like that. So, is everything sorted back home now?”

“I guess you could say we’re about halfway there. Jeffrey’s largely been the one running around putting out fires. And I say let him. I’ve been busy attempting to make up for lost time in the human relations department and made my retreat once I’d satisfied the minimum required courtesy.”

Richard let out a little snort. It sounded like he’d had a pretty rough time in a number of respects, but I guess that was to be expected, considering everything that happened. I told him he could take it easy now that he was back, and the beautiful man gave me a distressed look.

“I was expecting to have my hands full here, but it seems I’ve already missed the boat.”

“Oh, not at all. You’re just in time for the Christmas rush.”

“...Nearly all of the seasonal autumn sweets are sold out already.”

Oh, seems like my boss has grossly underestimated his part-timer.

I tapped Richard on the shoulder and had him turn around before I opened the sweets pantry for its illustrious owner for the first time in ages. I didn’t know when he’d be back, so I only stocked stuff that would keep for a long time, but even then, I had acquired a huge spread. Baked goods, cookies, vacuum-packed cheesecakes, and of course all sorts of limited seasonal chocolates.

The corners of Richard’s eyes tensed. The way his eyelids fluttered as he knelt down to check the contents of the cabinet, it almost seemed odd that it didn’t make a sound. He looked up at me and then back at the cabinet of treats. Me. Cabinet. Me. Cabinet. He couldn’t have been easier to read.

“You’re not warning me not to do things like this, huh? Don’t worry, I got receipts for everything.”

“I don’t even know what to say...”

“You’re worried about that, now? Trust me, I already know everything that’s going through your head. Go sit down in the lounge, I’ll make you some tea. You know what they say: ‘Behind every great man...’”

“...I’m not sure you understand how the rest of that idiom goes.”

“Huh? Isn’t it just ‘Behind every great man is a good friend?’”

“You fool. Open a dictionary for once in your life!”

“Oh, don’t be like that! If you must know, I just like seeing you in a good mood. I guess making you happy makes the trouble feel worth it. The way you smile when you see delicious sweets—it’s as refreshing as seeing a rainbow in the sky.”

I smiled, and Richard’s eyes tensed slightly. Crap. I probably shouldn’t have said that thing about rainbows and stuff. Well, I’m sorry if I spoiled your moment of bliss. I apologized, and Richard promptly returned to the lounge. I was a little scared, but I decided to go ahead and make tea for the time being.

I brewed tea that didn’t knock me out with its spiced aroma for the first time in ages, and also for the first time in ages, I served it in the delightful white-and-gold pair of cups and set both our portions onto a tray. I’d serve Saul what was left in the pot when he came back.

I had expected Richard to be waiting to enjoy a delightful teatime with sweets, but he had his box of wonders out on the table. He was in total customer-service mode, but it wasn’t even 10 yet. Was this a personal item or something? Maybe he’d stopped somewhere on his way back from England and acquired some stones?

“Your royal milk tea is ready.”

“Please have a seat.”

Huh?

I stood there dumbfounded. Richard put on his finest customer service smile and repeated, “Please have a seat.” What the—? Was he just messing with me? Also, his smile really was far too beautiful.

“Now, Mr. Nakata, this is the stone I would like to show you today.”

“I don’t understand? Are we playing shop or something...?”

Richard ignored my question and opened the lid of the velvet box.

There was only one stone inside. Did he prepare this specifically to show it to me? It was a rectangular faceted jewel, long and slender like a woman’s manicured nails, translucent and split into two colors. The upper half was a viridian green, and the bottom half was hot pink. Wait. *You can have two colors in one stone?*

“What is that? Are those different stones? Or is it natural?”

“This is bicolor tourmaline—*bi*—being a prefix meaning ‘two.’ Different colors coexist within a single stone. Is this your first time seeing a bicolor stone? This particular variety is often called watermelon tourmaline.”

Watermelon, huh? Made sense. I could see how that combo of bright green and deep pink would make someone think of a watermelon’s skin and flesh. Richard politely added that there were other varieties, too, and showed me some pictures on his phone. There were some dome-shaped examples among them, with the green part completely enclosing the pink core—just like a watermelon. It looked like a watermelon cut in half.

“But what’s the deal with this stone? And why are you showing it to me?”

Why was he going out of his way to introduce it to me like we’re strangers? I didn’t say it out loud, but I cocked my head to the side slightly, and Richard smiled at me. He looked like he was enjoying himself. But somehow it looked like he was having a little too much fun, and it was almost unsettling. What was he scheming?

“Mr. Nakata, now that I have shown you tourmaline in a great many colors, I must ask you: Do you have any idea where the word *tourmaline* originates from?”

When he asked me stuff, the answer was usually Latin or Greek. I gestured at him that I had no clue, and Richard responded by asking me where I’d go first on a trip around the world in a teasing tone. He was imitating me. I thought back to our time in London. Come to think of it, we did talk about something like that. Richard’s answer was Japan. And I said...

“...Sri Lanka?”

“Bravo. Tourmaline comes from the Sinhala word for ‘many-colored.’ As the stone can exhibit red, blue, yellow, orange, pink, green, and a variety of other colors all in the same mineral, the word became its name. But in the language of gemstones, this bicolor tourmaline has come to mean ‘existing in harmony,’ because the two colors exist together within one stone, retaining their individual character.”

“It’s been ages since I’ve heard you talk like this, but you know, you really are incredible when you talk about gemstones.”

It was so soothing. When Richard spoke about gemstones, he became some kind of other organism that transcended words like *beautiful* or *cool*. Tourmaline didn’t have scientifically proven healing effects or anything of the sort, like I’d heard from some dubious sources, of course. But surely, the effects those sources claimed had nothing on Richard when he was in his element. If nothing else, it was particularly effective on me.

I let out a slovenly sigh, and Richard smiled at me like he was really enjoying himself again. Crap. That was pretty rude of me. He’s definitely going to yell at me.

Or at least I thought he was.

“Mr. Nakata, it brings me great joy to witness that look of satisfaction on your face. And that alone makes me feel that returning to this country was worth the trouble.”

Huh?

That’s weird. I definitely wasn’t imagining it. Something really weird just happened.

I waited quietly for Richard to say something else. Like scolding me about the importance of hard work or something.

But wait as I did, the beautiful jeweler never opened his mouth. He just left it at that. What did it mean? I averted my eyes and took a sip of my tea. It was still too hot.

“Um... I wonder when Mr. Ranasinghe’s going to be back...”

“Now, while this particular tourmaline is an example of what some call the watermelon variety, specimens with such well balanced and defined color banding are rare indeed. Perhaps one might compare them to the almost miraculous harmony with which both reason and passion coexist within your own psyche, Mr. Nakata.”

“Wh-wh-what about my psyche?”

“As I said, both reason and passion coexist within it in miraculous harmony.”

“Um, are you sure you’re not confusing me with some other Mr. Nakata?”

“Whatever makes you say that? Do you truly believe that I could possibly confuse the one and only you for anyone else? Please, take a moment to pick up the stone and examine it up close. While you may know it as *denkiseki*—electric stone—I can assure you that it will not shock you if you touch it, so please, rest easy. As it is, however, both piezoelectric and pyroelectric, it has a near constant mild electric charge, but only so much so that it tends to collect dust rather easily. Oh, yes, speaking of shocking, I must sing the praises of your spur-of-the-moment actions, Mr. Nakata. Such as how it took almost no time at all from your acquisition of a plane ticket to flying across the world.”

“Uh, so, um, seriously, what are you trying to do?”

“It was truly shocking, like a flash of lightning. The fire of your youthful passion is ever fueled by wisdom, and your reckless adventures built upon the solid ground of deliberate planning.”

“Stop! Please, I’m begging you! My heart’s going to burst out of my chest if you keep going like that!”

“Heart palpitations and shortness of breath? How unlike you, Mr. Nakata. No matter how adverse your circumstances, or disadvantage you may be placed in, you never hesitate to dash headlong along the path you deem optimal, and that, I would say, is your greatest strength. A true embodiment of the Japanese samurai of legend.”

“Richard! What do you want from me?! You’re making my hair stand on end!”

“I have never seen you fret so before, Mr. Nakata, but I must say it is most endearing.”

“I’m going to get some water!”

I got up from my chair and ran into the kitchen. I grabbed the first glass I saw, filled it with tap water, and gulped it down. I felt like I did after a field day in elementary school. I wished there had been a pillow or something in the kitchen. I wanted to scream and punch something. But there wasn’t anything suitable around, so I just wrapped my arms around myself and shivered for a bit. My breathing was ragged. I needed to calm down and get a grip.

I caught my breath as best I could and headed back out into the lounge. Richard elegantly crossed his legs again and smiled at me sweetly. His face was so beautiful, it gave me goosebumps. I couldn’t look him in the eye.

“I—I must’ve said something to upset you...like maybe last time we had our English session or something?”

“Oh, perish the thought. I am simply describing you as you are and should be. However, if I have said something that runs contrary to your feelings, that is entirely my own failing, and for that I must deeply apologize.”

“You don’t need to apologize! Look, obviously, you’re—”

“Goodness, you really have put me in quite an uncomfortable position. Is there something displeasing about my behavior? I am simply paying back a tiny fraction of the warm admiration you shower upon me every single day,” Richard said and smiled. He looked like he was enjoying himself from the very bottom of his heart.

Suddenly, everything made sense.

I understood what was going on now. This hell of backhanded compliments was just payback. Payback for that bad habit of mine that Richard always scolded me for. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, rash words of praise for rash words of praise. It was only rational. And so embarrassing, I wanted to die. He’d scolded me like this over text once before, but this was a whole different level. I thought I’d reflected on my actions, but I didn’t really understand what it felt like until I was on the receiving end of it. I didn’t know what to say. I was

just so embarrassed I could have dropped dead on the spot.

“I...I’m sorry...”

“Whatever is the matter, Mr. Nakata? Why are you apologizing?”

“I mean...I...I know I’ve messed up... I know I’m always saying stuff that’s rude to you... Look, just...go ahead and ban me from talking about personal things, then maybe—”

“Oh, I desire no such thing.”

I asked him what he wanted me to do, then with a pathetic look on my face, and Richard just smiled. He didn’t look like he was teasing me this time though. It was his usual, beautiful jeweler’s face. The sight of it alone put me at ease. Admittedly, any time he smiled naturally, it tended to have that effect on me.

“I believe I told you this quite some time ago, but I understand that your verbal flourishes have no ill intent behind them. While I can’t understand it myself, you seem to enjoy lavishing me with praise. Consequently, I do not mind you doing so. In much the same way, I would like to indulge in the sweets I love to the greatest extent my health might permit, I implore you to praise me unabashedly to your heart’s content. But in return, I eagerly await the day that praising you will bring *me* such joy, Seigi. Whether through improving your English skills, your knowledge of gemstones, or in some other capacity, I’m expecting great things from you,” the beautiful jeweler said with a smile.

It was such a dazzling smile, it was like taking a direct hit from a stun grenade. But I knew I shouldn’t say that out loud. Or, maybe not. He did say he didn’t mind my praise as long as there was no ill intent behind it. So maybe it was fine. Maybe I should just say what I want to say.

Plus, I had plenty of things I wanted to tell him aside from how much I liked his appearance.

“...Just by being here and doing this with you, I’ve learned so much. The English conversation lessons over the phone are one thing, but even before that, you were always looking out for me. You really, really, really are the best boss in the world! I’m sure of it!”

“I will happily accept your lavish praise. And I think you may well be the

stupidest, most reckless, and naive part-timer I have had the pleasure of knowing, Seigi.”

“You’re finally being honest!”

“How rude. I’m always honest. Just as you are drowning in a wealth of initiative, bravery, and wit.”

“I am so very sorry—extremely sorry—please forgive me!”

“Pathetic. To think this is how you react when you’ve given me another pastime to enjoy.”

Another pastime to enjoy? I did? What did that mean?

Richard sipped his royal milk tea, looking very pleased with himself, but when he noticed the puzzled look on my face, he raised an eyebrow and announced as matter-of-factly as possible:

“I’m not quite sure when it started, but at some point, expressions of affection toward me began to feel like heavy burdens. Perhaps because, given my circumstances, I find it hard to deny that—as a certain Indian-Italian man once said—I invite nothing but misfortune in my wake. So in that sense, yes, you have been quite a source of frustration, the way you so casually express your earnest fondness for me. On no few occasions have I found myself thinking that I ought to have hired someone less affectionate.” Richard looked at me again, then added, “But that’s long in the past now.”

Ahh, I can’t take it. I wanna say it. I just have to say it. He’s so beautiful. Absolutely beautiful. I could look at the sparkle of his blue eyes forever. This might have been the first time I’d ever seen him look at me with such joy. How would I even begin to describe the beauty of this expression? Not that I particularly needed to describe it to anyone. I just wanted to commit it to memory as much as humanly possible.

And how happy it made me feel.

“At any rate, I will not hesitate to speak my mind to you now, either. For example, the fact that I’m quite fond of you, that I’m very grateful to you, that I feel that you’re like an occasionally troublesome little brother to me, and even the fact that you’re an excessively earnest idiot who will never learn has come

to seem endearing to me. I am very fortunate to have you in my life, Seigi.”

Richard’s mouth kept moving. It was like he was trying to say something to me. But what exactly? Apparently, when I saw something overwhelmingly beautiful, my mind just went blank. He was speaking right there in front of me, but it wasn’t coming through to me. I bet my friend in the psych department would find this phenomenon very interesting. Anyway.

“Oh...sorry. You were just so beautiful, I kind of lost myself...I didn’t hear anything you just said. Could you repeat it?”

After about three seconds of silence, Richard let out a little snort. His finest smile was nowhere to be seen, and his face contorted into an expression of displeasure. I was sure he’d get mad at me if I told him I liked it when he made that face, too.

But then suddenly.

There was a knock at the door.

After both of us simultaneously turned to look at Étranger’s front door, we did a 180 and looked in the opposite direction, almost like some kind of dance choreography. The sound hadn’t come from Étranger’s entrance. It wasn’t a customer. It had come from the opposite direction.

The back office.

As we went silent, the door to the office where the safe was housed quietly opened, and a dark-skinned man peered out.

“Pardon me. The two of you were under the impression that I was out of the shop, so I thought I’d just kill some time in here in the meantime, but I couldn’t take it any longer. Forgive me, Mr. Nakata. Also, I would like some tea, please.”

Richard’s voice trembled as he said Saul’s name under his breath. I guess Richard had mistakenly thought he’d left. Once I stood up, Saul came out of the office and took my seat in the lounge.

“Now, what were you talking about, Richard? You had the audacity to call me, the man to whom you owe your life, to Japan, asking me to step in to take care of the Ginza shop ‘indefinitely,’ and what’s the first thing you do when you

come back? Flirt with the part-timer?”

“Saul, you seem to have misunderstood...”

“Oh, don’t you worry, I don’t misunderstand things. Words are nothing more than the surface of the truth. After all, being a jeweler requires an eye that can see straight to the heart of things. You’re in the mood to praise someone, are you? Well, that’s just fine and dandy. But, Richard, perhaps the thing you should be asking yourself right now is whether the person you should be thanking is your loyal Chihuahua here, or your mentor in gemology, who cut short both his shopping trip to the Canary Islands and his Christmas plans to rush to your aid?”

“I am truly ashamed for all of the trouble that I have—”

“What are you standing around for, Mr. Nakata? Tea. And bring that out, too.”

“Aye-aye, sir!”

“Take a look at that, Richard, your precious puppy dog has grown quite attached to me in your absence.”

“I don’t appreciate how far you’re taking this...”

“And I see you’ve developed quite a mouth since I last saw you. You hold your head too high.”

“I see you’re still as fond of period dramas as ever...”

“Shall I recite each and every word of what you said earlier to Mr. Nakata? You needn’t worry about him becoming entranced by me, so I’m positive it’ll come through loud and clear.”

“Saul! I hope you’re just speaking figuratively because—”

“I said you hold your head too high. Learn some restraint.”

Richard looked down at the glass coffee table, closed his eyes, and lowered his head. Saul watched for the right moment and signaled me with a wink. I already had the item I’d brought with me in my hands. The stage was set.

“Good. Now raise your head.”

I slowly slipped around Richard, who was straightening himself out with a severe expression on his face. I was carrying something I'd prepared just for this moment.

The tense jeweler didn't seem to understand what was placed before him.

"Welcome home, Richard! I have a not-too-sweet cheesecake and a pudding tart just for you!"

"...What?"

"Like I said, the right half is a cheesecake and the left half is a pudding tart. It's a bicolor cake, but unlike that tourmaline, I made it and put it together."

Even though it was a combination of two cakes, this was way easier to make than the chocolate cake I'd poured my heart into when I was younger. I just wanted to bake something for the first time in a while. I knew Richard's favorite was pudding, but making a massive pudding was pretty out of the question, and I had asked him what he wanted to eat most back in England. I didn't have an oven in my apartment, so I went home for the first time in a while and made an entire cheesecake and a bread pudding—the basis of my pudding tart—by soaking bits of bread in the pudding mixture and baking it.

I gave the leftover half of the pudding tart to my mother, Hiromi, and the other half of the cheesecake to Tanimoto, even though I knew they were way too big for anyone to eat by themselves. But she lived at home, and she'd told me that her family all enjoyed sweet things, so maybe it would bring a little joy into their lives. I had a feeling it might make my future prospects a little brighter, too. Yesterday, when I told Tanimoto that I'd baked a cake because Richard was coming back, she teared up and said over and over that she was happy for me and hoped it made the person I cared about so much happy as well, just reaffirming my belief that angels were real.

Richard was in a daze, unable to take his eyes off the cake.

"Am I...dreaming?"

"Not anymore you're not! I'll cut it, so we can enjoy it together. Think of it as a second breakfast."

Our little celebration for the owner's return lasted until about thirty minutes

before opening. The first customer of the day rang the bell at the front door earlier than expected. I had to wonder why. Maybe Saul had told the regulars that Richard would be back today.

After I'd stashed the remaining cake in the fridge and confirmed that Richard's beautiful jeweler's face was back, I opened Étranger's door. Richard greeted the customer. "Welcome, what brings you here today?"

I loved these fresh moments more than anything else in the world.

Extra Case: Overcast Iolite

APPARENTLY, the stone was called iolite. Its Japanese name is *kinseiseki*—blue-violet stone. It was a blue stone that leaned more purple than sapphire, and it tended to have a characteristic haziness to it. When it's used as a gemstone, it's called iolite, but when it's being treated as a mineral, it's called cordierite. It was a strange stone, and depending on the angle you looked at it from, it could even look more like the color of dead leaves than blue. And so on and so forth.

"What's wrong, Seigi? Your eyes look dead."

"I dunno, it's just...absurd."

"Excuse me?"

I couldn't possibly remember the names of all these stones. There were too many of them.

The customer who just left had asked to see lots of different kinds of blue stones, and Richard's box of wonders was overflowing with a wide variety of blues. Of course, there was some sapphire in there, but also tanzanite, lapis lazuli, blue chalcedony, and the iolite in question.

When I started working part-time at *Étranger* six months ago, my idea of "gemstones" started and ended with diamond, ruby, sapphire, and emerald. But now I knew that zirconia sparkled like diamond, and about spinel that was as red as ruby, and that sapphire wasn't just blue but could be purple and even yellow. I'd even seen jade so clear that it was hard to tell it apart from emerald. If I had Tanimoto's knowledge of minerals, I could probably sort them in my head based on chemical composition and stuff, but I didn't know anything about that sort of thing and lacked both the drive and willpower to cram to learn it.

If I had to compare it to something, it felt like if you just went out to the beach to go clamming and put on your goggles, only to see the Mariana Trench

staring back at you when you stuck your head into the water. A beautiful world laid out before you, but it was too big and too deep. And there was no end to it. So much so that it was terrifying.

I explained as much to Richard, and he chuckled.

“It’s not like you’re going for a GIA or FGA certification, right? Why not simply learn about the stones you enjoy?”

“I guess you have a point.”

I’d been fine thinking about it that way until recently. But lately, I’d started to feel like all the work Richard was doing to introduce me to each and every stone was going to waste. My older classmates were always telling me that job hunting was all about connections, and I was starting to feel bad for neglecting my connections with these stones. Admittedly, it wasn’t like feeling that way was suddenly going to make my brain work any better.

I grumbled a bit, and Richard smiled again and gestured for me to come closer. He pulled something out of his suit pocket—a small vinyl pouch of the kind I’d often seen in the back room when he was handling stones. It looked like it had iolite in it. The bag was stuffed with cotton and had a label with something written in western script. It read: “Viking Sunstone.”

Viking? Like those guys with axes and horned helmets who crossed the sea on boats? I asked to be sure, and the jeweler nodded and confirmed.

“The term on the label is one that used to be used for iolite. People used to use this stone as a ‘sunstone.’”

“They used it...as a sunstone?”

Nothing about that made any sense to me. What did it mean? And I didn’t know how anyone could call such a cool-colored stone a “sunstone.” I didn’t even have a chance to bring it up before my handsome boss smiled and began to explain.

“I’m sure you already know this, but a certain percentage of the current inhabitants of England are descendants of Norman invaders from around the ninth century—in other words, Vikings. At the time, they were known for having the technology to build extremely long-haul boats. Now, Seigi, tell me, if

you were someone traveling for long distances on a boat, how would you know what direction you were traveling in?”

So he was asking me how I’d find my way in the ocean. I figured I could assume there wouldn’t be any land in sight to use as landmarks. The only option in such a situation would be a compass, right? But wait, Richard specifically mentioned the ninth century. I was pretty sure the compass was invented way later. I mean, I remembered learning in high school history class that it was the catalyst for the Age of Discovery. Which meant—I recalled what was written on the label. Sunstone. Oh, I get it.

“I could figure it out based on the position of the sun?”

“Bravo. Exactly. Aren’t we clever today?”

“O-oh, it’s nothing really.”

“Now, what would you do on an overcast day, when you couldn’t see the sun, my clever part-timer?”

“Huh?”

That’s right, the weather changes quickly on the ocean. And I know that England is a notoriously cloudy country. That probably extended to the waters off the coast, right? But what would you do if you had three or four cloudy days back to back? Would you just be screwed?

My expression grew a bit darker, and Richard smiled like he’d been expecting as much and held the iolite up in his pale hand to the light.

“You may have noticed that iolite seems to change color depending on your viewing angle. This property can be exploited to find the direction of the sun—if you were to hold the stone overhead and turn it, the color would shift from yellow to blue when the crystal is pointed toward the sun.”

Which meant that even with the faintest light, you could use this stone to find where the sun was. Or basically it could tell you where any given light was coming from. Couldn’t you just use your eyes for that though? I asked Richard as much, and he called me naive.

“Light, you see, can bend—it’s a phenomenon called refraction. When the

light of the sun moves through thick cloud cover, it reaches the human eye at a different angle as a result. Even if you could assume it would be a subtle error, it could prove to be a fatal one if used to navigate over a lengthy voyage.”

“I mean, we’re talking about the ninth century, right? Surely everyone was navigating more on guesstimates back then anyway.”

“And what if those people ‘navigating on guesstimates’ never reached land again?” Richard shrugged. It was a terrifying thought. “The sea is vast in comparison to the smallness of us humans. Perhaps you could say that iolite was acting as a missionary for the sunlight that guided those sailors. And that is how they used sunstone. Some theorize that a form of calcite called Iceland spar was used in a similar fashion. ”

“Hrm, well, all that was really complicated, but that stone really has a story to it, huh? I like that sort of thing,” I said with a smile, and Richard smiled warmly back at me.

“Do you understand now?”

“Huh? Understand what?”

“I mean, to you, stones are something you ‘don’t really get but like anyway,’ right? That’s why you feel frustrated every time your field of view opens to more possibilities, because you feel like your destination gets further away. You can’t expect to learn everything overnight. It takes steady, patient work. But you’re not a small boat on the vast ocean that has lost sight of its destination. While the most difficult moments may be those when you have no idea where you ought to go, you always know where the sun is.”

So basically, he was saying I knew exactly where I wanted to go? Or something like that? Richard shrugged when he noticed me go quiet and added that it was just a metaphor.

“Little by little as it may be, the stones are leaving their mark on you. Surely that’s enough—you needn’t pursue each and every one of them.”

Richard concluded with the piece of trivia that in spiritual circles, some believed iolite guided people down the ‘right path.’ I could believe it. But more than anything—

“...As long as I always have you by my side.”

“Huh?”

“You’re a master at seeing through people to figure out what’s bothering them—just like a real compass. Well, maybe the most beautiful compass in the world.”

“More illogical statements atop illogical statements. Why would a Japanese man aiming to become a Japanese government official, like yourself, use an Englishman as a compass?”

“I mean, I obviously wasn’t going to ask you for tips on the civil service exam, but I always know I can rely on you when it comes to the bigger questions.”

Richard sighed with an extremely fed-up look on his face. I couldn’t blame him. I might as well have been a preschooler telling my teacher that I knew I’d be safe because they’d always be there to save me. And, I mean, he was technically my boss.

“That reminds me, the custard pie that customer brought today doesn’t look like it’s going to last very long. Why don’t we go ahead and eat it? I’ll make tea.”

“If you don’t mind. Oh, and don’t forget about the sugar.”

“I know, you’re trying to go easy on it this month.”

“A pie, huh? I expect you to take care of half of it.”

“You got it.”

I nodded and headed to the kitchen. He was like this when recommending gems to customers, too, but...he really was perceptive. It seemed like he’d thought I was feeling discouraged.

While the tea was steeping, I cut the crispy pie in half and split it with Richard out in the lounge. The pie was dusted with powdered sugar, and the slightest breath would send it flying all over the place, so we enjoyed our tea and pie in silence. It was such a surreal scene, I felt like I might burst out laughing several times, but if I ruined my beautiful boss’s luxury dessert, I’d get my pay docked. I ended up spending the whole time staring at a wall and eating my pie with a straight face. Maybe I was imagining things, but Richard seemed to be doing the

exact same thing.

As I looked up at the night sky on my way home that day, I thought about the Vikings from over a thousand years ago. They set out for new lands and found themselves in England, but me? Where was I going? I guess even I could fall into the philosophical trap of wondering where I was going in life. It made me wonder if Richard ever had similar doubts, too.

In a move that was a bit out of character, I prayed to the night sky that I wouldn't lose my way even in moments like that. Stars were beginning to twinkle in the blueish-purple sky. Those stars in the sky surely hadn't changed since the time of the Vikings.

As I pondered all that while I walked, I took a wrong turn. I felt like I could hear Richard scolding me for not paying attention to where I was going at least. Trust me, I know.

Extra Case: Moonstone's Affection

THE MOON is so beautiful isn't it?!"

It was already pitch-black out when we left Shiseido Parlor. The pale blue moon was out in its full glory, watching over Ginza at night. I looked back at Richard as he was fixing his coat—"Isn't it?"—but he just looked away without saying anything. Regardless, I'd gotten really accustomed to having dinner with Richard after work like this on Saturdays. It seemed like my tributes of puddings were paying off.

"That's right, the stone you sold to that customer today was a moon rock, huh?"

"Moonstone. Please use its proper name. Moon rocks are a different type of mineral specimen. Mixing meanings like that is deplorable."

"Oh! I'll keep that in mind."

Today we had customers, a young woman and her parents, who bought a moonstone jewelry set. Her parents had the set custom-made at Étranger for their precious daughter who was getting married. It was a necklace and bracelet set featuring milky blue moonstone that shone rainbow colors and was paired with diamonds. The stones looked like they had borrowed their beauty from the northern lights. Moonstone was June's birthstone and had been thought to have mystical powers for ages—in particular, it was said to bring happiness and good fortune to women. When the daughter was surprised with the jewelry, she started crying, but when I served her some extra sweet royal milk tea, she thanked her parents through sniffles. I think happiness takes different forms for each of us, but I was sure that what I'd seen today was one of those forms.

The moon kept peeking out from between the buildings as we headed to the parking lot where Richard's Jaguar was parked. I kept looking up and mentioning how beautiful it was, and Richard looked back at me with a frustrated expression.

“The moon is beautiful, huh? Are college students these days really that unacquainted with their own literary traditions?”

“Huh? What do you mean? I mean, I’m studying economics, so my textbooks are full of western references—Marx, Weber, Mankiw, and so on.”

“And what of Shimei Futabatei and Souseki Natsume?”

“I’ll turn that one around on you. Have you read them?”

“Of course.”

“Whoa,” I groaned, and the beautiful jeweler sighed. He said something about young people these days and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“What?”

“I mean, you’re still pretty young yourself.”

“I simply object to the widespread perception that classical literature is only of interest to the elderly. Through the words and experiences of those who came before us, we can gain a fuller, deeper, and broader understanding of the world, just as gemstones offer a window into the human heart.”

“I can’t think of anything more classically Richard than finding a way to shoehorn gems into the conversation like that.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It was a compliment! I feel like I get smarter whenever I talk to you.”

“Perhaps my presence is a detriment if you’re satisfied simply feeling smarter.”

“All right, I’ll keep that in mind... Oh yeah, that reminds me. This came up in one of my sociology classes—apparently, the phrase ‘I feel like’ has gotten more common in pop music lately. I wonder why. Maybe lyrics like ‘I feel like I can get stronger’ are more popular than decisive ones like ‘I will get stronger!’ because there’s that little voice inside saying, ‘No way,’ and it ruins the immersion or something if you’re too direct?”

“Unfortunately, I’m not terribly well acquainted with the trends of today’s Japanese youth. But perhaps by that same logic, you could say that the power

gemstones have is simply ‘a feeling’ as well.”

“Is that really something a jeweler should be saying?”

“I’m off the clock already. Plus, it’s not inherently a negative thing.”

When we got to the parking lot, Richard looked me over and folded his arms. He was such an immaculately beautiful man. He looked almost like a statue made of moonbeams. As familiar with him as I was at this point, beauty was still beauty. I felt I could never get tired of looking at him—just like the moon.

“Wh-what? Is there something wrong?”

“Now, this is just a *feeling*, but I do think humans really have the ability to grow stronger. The ability of humans to see what they want in things—in essence, the human power to seek hope in even the tiniest spark. I don’t think it’s such a bad thing. On nights like this when it ‘feels like’ the light of the moon is watching over us, it certainly creates a kind of peaceful mood,” Richard said. He looked up at the night sky just like I had and whispered, “The moon really is beautiful.”

He pressed the button on his key to unlock the car and slipped into the Jaguar’s driver’s seat. I joined him in the passenger seat. I had to say, no matter how many times I sat in it, the angle of this seat really was perfect. It felt like it was molded perfectly to my body.

“Now, shall I drop you off at Takadanobaba Station?”

“Thanks. By the way, when are you expecting me to respond with ‘I could just die’?”

Richard’s face in that moment was a sight to behold. His mouth contorted as if he was about to say “What?” and his beautiful eyebrows raised. His blue eyes stared daggers at me.

“...That’s how it goes right? Shimei Futabatei, Souseki Natsume, and ‘the moon is beautiful’?”

How do you translate the phrase “I love you”—words that never existed in the Japanese language in the first place—into Japanese? Apparently, the literary masters of the Meiji period struggled with that question. It was

probably a staple conversation topic over drinks. Well, I dunno how standard it really is, but the guys from the Japanese literature department got really heated over it the last time I went out with them. They kept saying that us dumbasses from the economics department should learn a thing or two about it because girls like this sort of thing. Shimei Futabatei translated “I’m yours” as “I could just die,” and Souseki Natsume had declared that “I love you” should be translated as “The moon is beautiful.” A useful piece of trivia. Or so they claimed, but considering the fact that none of the guys at the party had girlfriends, it probably wasn’t all that useful after all.

Richard froze for a moment and then let out a big sigh before turning the key. The machine roared to life.

“...You chilled me to the bone with that one.”

“I knew that’d get you! You know, I actually am capable of saying ‘Japanese-y’ things sometimes.”

“If you say that one more time I’m kicking you out of the car. Be quiet for a moment.”

Richard backed out of the parking lot, stepped on the accelerator, and drove down Chuo-doori. We didn’t say a word in the car for a bit. After we’d passed four or five buildings, the beautiful jeweler opened his mouth again.

“...You shouldn’t throw words like that around so lightly. Words divorced from their context are like a lone stone, removed from the bracelet it belongs to. Under what circumstances were the words ‘the moon is beautiful’ uttered? And what made Asya think ‘I could just die’? What really matters is what led up to those moments. They’re not just phrases. I suspect that the people of this country understood that better before they were overrun with imported goods.”

“Hey, so, honest question: What made you want to read those old Japanese classics?”

Richard didn’t respond. It’s not like I wasn’t aware of his tendency not to respond to my questions, but his lack of response to this particular question was out of character. I had to wonder if there was a particular reason for it. Like something to do with the times you’d want to say things like “The moon is

beautiful” or “I could just die.”

It was clearly not a topic I should pursue though. I pretended to be distracted by something interesting I saw out the window and smiled for no particular reason. I squished myself up against the window and looked up.

“Oh, I can still see the moon.”

“Can you, now? Is it beautiful?”

“Hm, not as beautiful as you.”

Richard’s hand abruptly slipped off the steering wheel and flipped on the car stereo. This time, the roar of sound wasn’t the Finnish metal from last time but some kind of ethnic female voices chanting. I had no words. What was it even? I shouted loudly, asking what language it was in, and he replied that it was Bengali. An Indian song, I guess? In an instant, the mood in the car was subtropical. We couldn’t talk without shouting.

“Hey! If I upset you! I’m sorry!”

“I can’t hear you,” Richard mouthed. He didn’t seem interested in talking. But he also didn’t seem particularly angry—he was almost smiling. I guess it was like he was saying I was being so stupid, it was laughable. He seemed a lot more relaxed than he was when he name-dropped those authors earlier. Good. I felt like I could relax, after panicking for saying something dumb.

When I got out of the car, the subtropical atmosphere immediately vanished. The air outside the turnstiles at Takadanobaba Station was chilly. Richard quickly said goodbye and was off again in his Jaguar. I watched until the car was out of sight—it was a bit of a habit I’d developed. Just before the green car disappeared around the corner, it flashed its hazard lights as if to tell me to get my butt home immediately.

I found myself looking up at the sky for no reason in particular. There was that pale blue moon, hanging in the black sky just as before.

Now, this was another one of those feelings, but I was pretty sure the feeling I felt in that moment was another kind of happiness. The moon really was beautiful tonight.



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